

**WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE & MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

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## **I. WITH THE WORD OF LIFE ON THE ROADS OF ASIA-OCEANIA**

*- Bishop Pablo Virgilio S. David*

The Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in the Vatican from 5-26 October 2008 was the first global Synod I've ever attended. For me as a neophyte participant, the most significant moment in that ecclesial gathering was the reading of the Concluding Message of the Synod traditionally referred to as the *Nuntius*, addressed "to the People of God". I remember how deeply moved I was by the lyrical language of that beautiful document. You could hear a pin drop as it was being read in the Synod hall. The reverent silence was broken only by the resounding applause of the whole congregation at the end. Soon afterwards, at the ground floor hall where we had our refreshments, in many different languages imaginable, I could hear countless remarks affirming the beauty of that Message, some of them claiming that it was among the best Concluding Synod Messages ever written.

### **The Emmaus Story & the Synod *Nuntius***

I wish to begin this keynote by proposing to use the inspiring Emmaus story in Luke 24:13-33 as a narrative summary of the main content of the Synod's Message, specifically the four aspects of the Word—which, I expect, would be familiar to you already by now: the Voice, the Face, the House, and the Roads of the Word. From the general theme of this Congress, it is obvious that the organizers are suggesting to get us to focus ourselves on the "Roads of the Word," namely—the Mission.

#### **1. THE VOICE OF THE WORD: REVELATION**

On the road to Emmaus, Luke tells, us the two disciples felt their hearts burning as the stranger who walked and talked with them proceeded to explain to them the Scriptures. The Word of God was revealed to them through this nameless, faceless stranger who helped them "make sense" of the otherwise absurd events that had taken place in Jerusalem. In short, they heard his Voice and felt his presence even as his face remained veiled underneath their grief and disillusionment.

## 2. THE FACE OF THE WORD: JESUS CHRIST

At the breaking of the bread, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” This stranger began to have a face only when, having heard his voice, they now entered into fellowship with him. Through the breaking of the bread, the veil of grief and confusion that kept him a stranger to them was likewise torn apart so as to reveal the face of the Word to them in Jesus their Teacher who suffered, died, and was risen to continue journeying with humankind. This Word who assumed a human face in Jesus has to continue to be revealed in the many other strange faces of the world, including the brown, yellow, and white races of Asia-Oceania.

## 3. THE HOUSE OF THE WORD: THE CHURCH

“Stay with us; it is nearly evening...” This was the invitation of the weary disciples to the stranger who had walked with them along the way. They invite him to a wayside inn, this time to sit at table with them. More than the Emmaus inn, it was their deep longing for the Lord amidst the darkness of the veiled face of the Word that made them feel secure and “at home”. In the proclaimed Word, in the fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, in spiritual communion—they had also found the house of the Word, the Church. Later, these men would return to their company in Jerusalem—back to the upper room in order to gather together in his name. And even after the face that was revealed to them had already disappeared, they remained in the assuring certainty of his presence. He disappeared from them only to reappear in them and through them as the new face of the Messiah for the many others who seek him. And to as many as seek him and find him, he continues to be revealed, this time as Greek among Greeks, Roman among Romans, European among Europeans, American among Americans, Asian among Asians, African among Africans, etc. The Divine Word that pitched its tent in Judaism will likewise have to make a home in every culture so that our own cultural barriers will fall apart and make way for God’s temple in the Church, the body of Christ, the House of the Word.

#### 4. THE ROADS OF THE WORD: THE MISSION

The road to Emmaus was originally meant to be an escape route. (Remember, those two men were not really just traveling casually; they had slipped out of the upper room. In short, they were running away.) But the encounter with the Word would redirect their journey; it would turn their escape into a retreat, and this retreat would transform their fear into courage, their grief into joy, and set them back on track, to their real goal: Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem to Rome and the rest of the world.

The legend about Peter running away from Rome and meeting the Lord on the road is really a pious retelling of the same story: *Quo Vadis, Domine?* Where are you going, Lord? "I am going to Rome to suffer and die again." He was supposed to have answered. The Lord indeed has a way of looking at every escapist in the eye and returning the question, as he did to Peter, "And you, where are you going, Peter?" The roads of the Word will always be seen by the world as the opposite direction. We cannot call them the Mission if they follow the same itinerary of the world, if they are not yet imbued with the courage and joy that comes from having heard his voice, recognized his face, and stayed at home with him.

The Asia-Oceania region had already heard the Voice of the Word long before the first tide of missionaries reached our shores. In creation, in the unfolding of our own histories, in the great religions and cultures that have for many centuries addressed the basic human quest for meaning and purpose, in the many men and women of wisdom and renown revered by our ancestors for their relentless searching for justice and compassion—the Faceless stranger has, in more ways than one already spoken eloquently to our ancestors on the road.

But Jesus the stranger reached Asia-Oceania in the person of the missionaries who came to our lands and walked with us and gave the voice of the Word a human face, albeit European, American or from whatever race or color. The face that was revealed to us was also that of Jesus, but no longer looking like the Palestinian Jewish man from Nazareth. Jesus suffered, died, resurrected, ascended into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit—so

that he could become a Parthian face to the Parthians, a Mede face to the Medes, an Elamite face to the Elamites, a Phrygian face to the Phrygians, a Pamphilian face to the Pamphilians, an Asian face to the Asians. Fr. Mateo Ricci, they say, despite his unmistakably Italian face, so immersed himself in the Chinese culture in order to be a Chinese face to the Chinese. So too have countless other missionaries who allowed themselves to be totally immersed (There is your image of baptism!) in the Asian condition to allow Jesus to speak as eloquently to the Asians.

### **Pope Benedict XVI's Synodal Agenda?**

Outside his homilies and formal speeches at the opening and closing rites of the Synod, Pope Benedict XVI intervened to comment on the Synod's working paper or *Instrumentum Laboris* only once. He spoke a little longer than the normal recommended time limit of five minutes but managed to deliver what to my mind seemed to be his own personal agenda for the Synod. I will not be surprised if the content of that single intervention reverberates in the entire document of the final draft of the Apostolic Exhortation, as rewritten and personalized by the Holy Father himself.

The Pope did not always stick to his prepared notes when he delivered his intervention at the Synod hall. Whenever he stopped reading to give a further elaboration to his points, he looked out at the audience and gazed at us with deep-set and piercing eyes. From the way he punctuated his lines with a Germanic tone of gravity, one could sense that he was speaking from the heart, or from his guts, or perhaps even from his bone marrow.

In his opening lines, he recalled the two methodological guidelines for suitable exegetical work as laid out in *Dei Verbum*, n. 12: the historico-critical and theological. He lamented the tendencies among modern Biblical scholars to engage in the two disciplines, but in a dichotomized way. Either way results in an impoverishment of the Biblical message, as far as the Pope is concerned.

“Historical fact,” he says, “is a constituent dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology but rather true history, and is therefore to be studied alongside **serious historical research methods.**” But he is quick to point out all the same that “this history has **another dimension, that of divine action.**” Hence also the simultaneous need for the theological level of interpretation, following the principle that “Scripture is to be interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written.”

For Benedict XVI, “Only where the two methodological levels, both historical-critical and theological, are observed can one speak of theological exegesis – of an exegesis adequate to this Book.” While the Pope recognizes the high level of “academic exegetical work currently being done”, he bewails the fact that not as much is being done on the theological level. (I will explain later what he means by this theological level.) This, he insists, has very serious consequences:

“The first consequence of the absence of this second methodological level is that the Bible becomes solely a history book. Moral consequences can be drawn from it, history can be learned from it, but the Book as such speaks of history alone and exegesis is no longer truly theological but instead becomes purely historiographical, literary history. This is the first consequence: the Bible remains in the past, speaks only of the past.”

### **Pope Benedict’s Agenda and its Relevance for Asia-Oceania**

At the earlier Synod for Asia, Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines recalls that he happened to be in the same small group discussion circle as the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who he said, was “known to be formal and exacting, but humbly struggling in his own way.” Apparently, as they exited the hall, they found themselves walking together and sustaining the discussion, exchanging reflections on the question of Jesus as the only Savior. Bishop Tagle recalls that at some point, the future Pope turned to him and said, “You know Father, that question is

very difficult. I would not know how to handle it.” (I call that the humble ignorance of the wise.)

The concern that had been raised by Benedict XVI at the Synod is obviously a western issue. Its proper setting is no doubt the secularized atmosphere of Europe and America. Inevitably, however, we share it too in the Asia-Oceania region because the tide of earlier missions that brought the Christian faith to our region came from the western continents, particularly from Europe. As far as Christendom is concerned, when Europe sneezes, Asia catches a cold. The faith that the European missionaries brought to Asia and Oceania was not in a cultural vacuum. It came with its own cultural conditionings which were specifically predominantly European.

They were generally well-meaning and imbued with evangelical and missionary zeal, but they likewise carried the historical baggage of the Europe of their times, including the Counter-reformation theology and spirituality of the European Church. They brought with them their art, their architecture, their language, their world-view which were every bit European and transplanted them on Asian soil. Until then, the few that came in the mould of Fr. Mateo Ricci who felt the need to allow Christ to be Chinese in China were more an exception than the rule in the approaches to mission.

In his Synod intervention, the SVD Superior General Fr. Tony Pernia pointed out that “the mission of the Church needs to be understood in terms of dialogue...” He defined mission not as a one-way activity but as “a two-way exchange of gifts between the missionary and the people.” He insisted that while the task of proclaiming the Word of God remains a constitutive aspect of the mission, the Church can only proclaim God’s Word effectively if she also knows how to listen to it not only as revealed in Scriptures, but also “in the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (GS 1).” Fr. Pernia humored the Synod when, at the end of his intervention, he described the role of the missionaries “who are engaged in mission at the frontiers of our faith and the margins of society” as

**"hearing aid"** of the Church. Mission in Asia has to begin with **hearing** before the missionary can do any effective **talking**; the listening and the proclaiming are two indispensable components of mission, but the listening must precede proclamation. This is the great paradigm shift in mission that happened after the Second Vatican Council.

To push Fr. Pernia's thoughts on mission as dialogue a little bit farther, perhaps we can borrow from an earlier lecture by Fr. S.J. Emmanuel entitled "Asian Churches for a New Evangelization". If dialogue is what mission is about, and the missions are characterized by the Synod Message as the "roads of the Word," Fr. Emmanuel would point out three roads for the Word in Asia-Oceania: 1) interreligious dialogue, 2) inculturation, 3) socio-political and economic involvement, or put more simply, dialogue with **religions, with cultures, and with the poor**. After several centuries of well meaning missionary monologue, the missionary Church of Asia today has a lot of listening to do, to be able to proclaim the Word of Life more effectively. With the exception perhaps of the Philippines, in most other places in Asia, this missionary Church is but a tiny minority that can best be characterized as the parabolical mustard seed, or leaven in a mass of dough, or salt and light.

### **THE ROADS TO ASIA-OCEANIA TOWARDS A NEW EVANGELIZATION**

Around a year after Bishop Luis Tagle of the Philippines wrote about his little conversation at the Synod hall with the man he didn't know would be the next Pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, met with a group of Catechists and Religion teachers in Rome and gave them a talk on "**New Evangelization**". The occasion that called for that talk was the Jubilee of Catechists on 12 December 2000. I had the chance to read it only because I was asked to do so by the organizers of a national gathering of youth leaders in Bukidnon, Southern Philippines two weeks ago. I had goose bumps as I read through that brief but powerful speech; it was like it had preempted the Synod eight years earlier. It also made me understand what Benedict XVI really meant to say at that Synod hall when he gave his one and only intervention, albeit in a language that was more erudite and academic. In contrast, his talk to the Catechists was more down to earth, a



more practical exhortation that I recommend highly to everyone involved in pastoral Biblical apostolate.

Ratzinger had actually picked up the idea of a “new evangelization” from Pope John Paul II who used it much too often but did not really expound much about it. Perhaps Ratzinger felt he had to own it to be able to say it with conviction. Instead of borrowing from his words, I beg your indulgence to allow me to own it too, so I can say it with as much passion as he did on that day of December 12, 2000.

You would surely remember that passage in Luke chapter 4, where, we are told, Jesus came home to Nazareth and was made to read a text from Isaiah—those lines from Isaiah 61 where the prophet said,

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. In Greek, *euaggelisasthai ptochois...* to “evangelize” the poor. He actually read an old message. The words were old—around eight centuries before him. But he made it **new**, the moment he stopped reading and said, ***“TODAY, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”*** After that, he would start to get into trouble...and all because he said TODAY!

That was surely not the first time they heard him. He must have done it many times before, and they had no problem with the way he did it. So what was it really that they took offense at? How did they read what he had meant? Before I go on, may I ask you to please read for me the following line?

GODISNOWHERE

What did you read? Well, it really just depends on where you put the spaces in between the supposed words, doesn't it? Jesus got into trouble because instead of reading GOD IS NOWHERE, he read it as GOD IS NOW HERE. And he said it like he meant it.

He said NOW, TODAY... not YESTERDAY, not TOMORROW. Suddenly, it wasn't Isaiah saying it anymore but Jesus himself. He had owned the Words historically attributed to Isaiah. He didn't say "The Spirit of the Lord was upon Isaiah..." Rather, he said, "UPON ME..."

As a good Jew, he was really just being consistent with the God of the OT, the God who said he had "seen the affliction of (his) people and heard their cry for help..." And when asked by Moses what his name was, God is supposed to have said, "I am who am." I AM, he said, not I WAS, not I WILL BE. The God of Israel introduces himself as "the eternal present" or "the eternal now." The NOW is what makes evangelization NEW—to bring good news to the poor, not the poor of yesterday, not the poor of tomorrow but rather the poor NOW. (The true believers are neither YESTERDAY people or TOMORROW people; they are NOW people.)

Ratzinger takes the NEW in "new evangelization" exactly as it means in the NEW of "NEW TESTAMENT". It does not cancel out the old. Rather it gives freshness to it in the *HIC et NUNC*, the HERE and NOW. What Jesus had already proclaimed earlier sounded harmless, acceptable, perhaps even impressive **while he kept it in the past**. But the moment he said TODAY, it started to threaten, disturb, and even provoke them. His mission began, Luke tells us, the moment he actualized the words of the prophet. He made the words of Isaiah truly God's Word by making them into a present event, in his person.

If these words indeed were not just the human words of Isaiah but the Word of God, then he was actually telling his audience, "Today, meaning right now, God is speaking..." For Jesus, to bring GOOD NEWS is to say GOD IS PRESENT, GOD IS HERE, RIGHT NOW. He did not just speak about God; he spoke and the poor heard God. That's what makes it GOOD NEWS!

The common lament of the poor and those who suffer in the Psalms was "WHERE IS YOUR GOD?" (As in Psalm 42:3, 10) The poverty, the injustice, the misery they suffered meant only one thing to them: GOD IS NOWHERE. The Good News is

**GOD IS NOW HERE.** Not only did they hear God's Voice in Jesus; in him they saw the God with a human face.

Benedict's constant lament about today's secular society is that it tries to exclude God from our current concerns. Unfortunately, people who live in the absence of God are POOR. Where lies the poverty of modern men and women today? It lies in the attitude that tries to lock up God in the confines of the Church, the temple, or places of worship. It lies in the attitude that says, "Keep God in your temple; the world belongs to us. Keep God in sacred spaces; the secular space belongs to us." The real atheists are those who believe in a God who can be put in a closet. Jesus unsettled people because he proclaimed a God who breaks out of the closet, a God you can't keep in a box called a temple. Nathan already said that to David, centuries before (2 Sam 7:1-14). So did Jeremiah in his temple speech (Jer. 7:1-14); so also did Isaiah (Isa. 66:1-3). Jesus' GOOD NEWS is "Every space has to become sacred space." And our good news to Asia-Oceania now is: "Christ is not dead. He is alive: *heri, hodie, et semper* (yesterday, today, forever)." New evangelization is about a message that is *semper antiqua et semper nova* (ever ancient, ever new).

Long after Israel had been conquered and destroyed, the prophets gave the assurance that for as long as there was one Israelite that remained faithful to the covenant, the nation lived on. What they said of Israel, we say also of the Church, the new Israel. For as long as Jesus remains present in his body, the Church, in his members, or even in just one single member anywhere in Asia, it means Jesus continues to walk the streets and byways of Asia.

What are the people of Asia and Oceania searching for? The same things people in any corner of the world search for: how to be human, how to live fully, how to find true happiness. Is there a way? Is there a path to follow? New evangelization is about answering the questions of modern men and women. To evangelize is not just to show the way; it is to live it. Jesus did not say I will show you the way. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6)

Joseph Ratzinger tells us the poor of this world are those who are unhappy; those who can't find happiness; those who live in the darkness of meaninglessness. They see life as no different from a piece of rubbish thrown on the wayside. Life for them is an unfortunate accident, a punishment, a burden. And the extremely poor in this world are those incapable of love, those who waste their lives and live it without purpose, those enslaved by greed, selfishness, envy, and such other infectious diseases of modern existence.

Our earthly life is short; that is why Jesus proclaimed the Good News with a sense of urgency. New evangelization is about reaching out to the lost, those who have fallen into the pit or quicksand of a wasted life. It is life people seek, even when they seek money or employment. In Tagalog, our word for employment is HANAP-BUHAY. Literally, it means LIFE-QUEST, not MONEY-QUEST. No one can help others find life, except those who have found it themselves.

You see, the Gospel is not just an idea or a written Word about some past event. It became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth; it has to continue to become flesh now, in us—his communities of disciples in this part of the world so he can walk the roads of Asia and Oceania and seek out the poor, who alone are ready for the Good News. It is hunger we are addressing when we evangelize, a deep hunger for God that can be satisfied only by the Word of Life, the Bread of Life. Fellow disciples—as we break and eat the Word of Life, the Bread of Life—let us become what we eat, so that we can be the strange traveler of Emmaus in every road, every nook and corner of Asia and Oceania who will walk with the poor who long to hear THE VOICE of the Word, who long to see THE FACE of the Word, who long for fellowship in the HOUSE OF THE WORD, and who long to retrace their steps on the ROADS OF THE WORD. Amen.

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## II. SHARING THE WORD OF LIFE IN ASIA AND OCEANIA

In Dialogue with Cultures

- *Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, SDB*

### **Introduction**

"...even in the modern secularized city, in its squares and in its streets - where disbelief and indifference seem to reign, where evil seems to prevail over good, creating the impression of a victory of Babylon over Jerusalem - one can find a **hidden yearning, a germinating hope, a quiver of expectation**. As can be read in the book of the prophet Amos, "The days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I shall send a famine on the country: not hunger for food, not thirst for water, but **famine for hearing the word of the Lord**" (8:11). The **evangelizing mission** of the Church wants to answer this hunger. (The Final Message, No 10, Synod on the Word 2008)

I begin with an earnest appeal that we cultivate a **deep commitment** to the cause of sharing the 'Word of Life' that Jesus has given to us. These are trying times when faith seems to be growing feebler in Christian hearts and sharing the Gospel is considered an expression of cultural chauvinism. Secular humanism has taken the place of Christian idealism and commitment. The promotion of 'human rights' is replacing the Christian missionary thrust. Togetherness at sports and entertainments seems to satisfy the human need for being together, which was expressed by Christians at a deeper level in the contexts of liturgy and service. Ideologies, political thoughts, social philosophies of all kinds find free expression, while sharing a religious message is considered obscurantist and out-fashioned.

There are Christian believers who are willing to share the fruits of their faith, but not faith itself which is the source of all good things that they do. The fact is that the people who would greatly benefit from the fruits of your faith (e.g. works of charity, schemes for development, action for justice and peace), would profit even more if they were exposed also to the **sources of your inspiration and reasons for your conviction**; in other words, to your faith itself. They would become movers of all such noble services with double determination if they had the strength derived from faith. In the context of this total indifference to the sharing of the faith, anyone who is convinced that announcing

the 'Word of Life' that Jesus has shared with us is the central Christian concern, has a duty of jealously guarding this conviction and cultivating it in others.

## 1. Don't begin from a Wrong Starting Point

We read in Paul, "We also speak, because we believe" (2 Cor 4:13). If therefore you are a believer, speak.

However, let us first of all look at the mistakes we keep making in sharing the 'Word of Life'. Many shy away from the evangelizing mission because they have witnessed major blunders from the side of the announcers of the Gospel or have committed some themselves. They are reluctant to show themselves to be fanatics. For example, over-zealous preachers at times begin their mission in aggressive tones and with the wrong message. The wrath of God and his ultimate judgement are not a good starting point for introducing Christianity to people. This message does not sound like the 'Word of Life'. And yet we see street preachers engaging themselves in these exercises.

Themes like Church structures, authority patterns, canon law demands, theological differences, bewildering number of devotions, claims of historical achievements, and narration about the superior performance of the Church in different fields based on historical facts or current achievements...these may not constitute the most inspiring matter for genuine God-seekers.

## 2. Listen, Learn, and Come on the Wavelength of People

"In proclaiming the kingdom of God, **Jesus never spoke over the heads** of the people with a vague, abstract or ethereal language. Rather, he would conquer them by **starting there where their feet were placed**, in order to lead them, through daily events, to the revelation of the kingdom of heaven" (The Final Message, No 11, Synod on the Word 2008)

Few sharers of the Word are able to go beyond such Church-related areas of interest. They just do not know where to begin. Their discourses are loaded with internal vocabulary, Catholic theological and catechetical jargon; their concerns are so centred around inner-Church debates, that no one beyond the Catholic

fold will understand what they are talking about. To such teachers, if they would not take offense, I am tempted to say, "It is better to keep silence". Truly, we can safely affirm we shall never win a hearing, unless we have **first kept silence, listened, learned**, entered into our conversation-partner's life and language, changed our attitudes to be attuned to his/her worldview and felt-needs. Silence in this context stands for respect for the other, attention not only to his/her words but also to his feelings, appreciation for his people and his culture, and esteem for his life experience.

The things I have suggested go beyond the techniques in the self-help book that you have recently read. They demand **depth**. They can only spring from genuine religious seriousness, a co-feeling with the rest of humanity, a sense of commitment to the common good, an eagerness to build a common ground for sincere religious sharing. This is proved most of all by the **spirit of renunciation** and preparedness for sacrifice in behalf of society, qualities so greatly esteemed in all Asian traditions. That is how Mother Teresa won the hearts of people instantaneously. Her life itself was an **icon of God's love** for his people evidenced by her ability to renounce and to serve. She proved that what she was preaching was truly the 'Word of Life'. That is what other saints like her have done, for example, "...in saint Benedict, and in other great men of God, witnesses of communion with God and with the sisters and brothers, **the word of God come to life**" (The Final Message, No 10, Synod on the Word 2008).

### 3. Walk into the Lives of People

"Christ is the Word...Jesus of Nazareth who walks the roads of a marginal province of the Roman Empire, who speaks the local language, who reveals the traits of a people, the Jews, and its culture ." (Final Message, No 4, Synod on the Word)

How do we begin this Mighty Mission. My suggestion is simple: **Begin with what is possible** at a given time, start from where you are, meet with people you know, win support from the people you are familiar with, use the methods you are acquainted with, begin with the work you are already doing. But let the work you are doing help you to **walk into the lives of individuals and**



**communities** in order to respond to their need. Jesus came into the lives of Zaccaheus, the Samaritan woman and others to offer them just what they were looking for.

That is what missionaries have always done while bringing the message of Christ through their relevant involvement in people's lives and dedicated service. St. Francis Xavier came to the aid of the fisherfolk of South India, Fr. Constant Lievens came to the assistance of the tribal people of Chota Nagpur. Even while religious persons are involved in a specific form of social assistance, their deeper commitment is to the **central concerns of humanity** like justice, peace, mercy, love, forgiveness, honesty, sincerity, solidarity, generosity, responsibility...and they hold these positive qualities together with their sturdiness of faith.

#### **4. Come on the Wavelength each Person, Respecting his Individuality**

"This is what the deacon Phillip would do on the way from Jerusalem to Gaza, when he spoke this emblematic dialogue with the Ethiopian official: "Do you understand what you are reading? ... How could I, **unless I have someone to guide me?**" (Ac 8:30-31) (The Final Message, No 7, Synod on the Word 2008)

**Every person is unique.** We have to come on the wavelength of each person as individually required in each case. Jesus met the Samaritan woman when she was looking for water, Mathew at the height of his profit-making performance, the Roman Centurion while engaged in his duty of executing criminals. Philip caught up with the Ethiopian reading a scriptural text; Paul captured the attention of Lydia she was trying to win new customers for her produce. The list is long, but each can be studied with interest. Almost no two cases seem perfectly to match with each other. "In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred" (Ecclesia in Asia, 20).

#### **5. Give each Person what he/she Requires**

"Jesus, in his parable of the sower, reminds us that there are arid lands, full of rocks, choked by thorns (cf. Mt 13:3-7). He who goes forth into the streets of the world also discovers the **slums** where suffering and poverty,

humiliation and **oppression**, marginalization and misery, physical and psychological ills and loneliness can be found. Often the stones on the road are bloody because of wars and **violence**; in the palaces of power, corruption meets injustice. The voices of the **persecuted** rise on behalf of faithfulness to their conscience and fidelity to their faith”

(The Final Message, No 13, Synod on the Word 2008)

While the core content of the ‘Word of Life’ will always remain unalterable, the **manner of introducing it will vary from situation to situation**. We would speak differently to children, youth, adults, and sick people; to businessmen, sports personnel, politicians, mountaineers, and tourists; people emerging from colonialism, those being free for the first time from communist domination, dominant groups, minorities; people with a tribal background or Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic background.

“....word expresses itself in the **Bible** according to a human language, that **must be decoded**, studied and understood” (The Final Message, No 5, Synod on the Word 2008)

## **6. Expose People, not to your Skills, but to your Faith**

“In this act (of preaching), the minister should be transformed into a prophet as well..... make the question of conversion and vital commitment blossom in their hearts: "What are we to do, brothers?"

(Ac 2:37) (The Final Message, No 7, Synod on the Word 2008)

But in every case the personality and **creative instinct of the teacher of the Word** seem to play a big role. Many a sharer of the Message is ‘insecure’ and afraid to let his dialogue partners come too close to him. His fear is that his partner’s scrutinizing eyes will size him up and give weight to his words accordingly. He feels that his personality is none too flattering. His worry is legitimate, for his words cannot have greater value than he himself. This is the reason why we are happy to expose people to our scholarship, our eloquence, our teaching skills, our organizing techniques, our institutional complexes, but not to ourselves and to our faith.

When we are less than God-centered, dedicated, egoless, other-oriented, generous, kindly and warm-hearted, we seem to be

everything except what the Gospel wants us to be. That is the reason for our confusion. That is the reason why our words do not have convincing power and we have long lost the *skill of persuasion*. **Mother Teresa's whisper** moved millions.

## 7. A Look at Paul

“**Inculturation**, the “incarnation” of the Gospel in the various cultures, affects the very way in which the Gospel is preached and understood and lived” (Ecclesia in Oceania 16)

Let us take a few lessons from the great apostle Paul:

1. Addressing the Word of Life to the Athenians, Paul began with the ‘unknown God’. That arrested the attention of his listeners and aroused their curiosity. Likewise you should begin with the **world of interests** of the people to whom you are addressing the Word: e.g. with youth you would begin with sports or discussions about their future; to businessmen you would speak of prices and profits; to soldiers about effort, discipline, victory; philosophers of ideas and theories.
2. Start with your listeners’ **world of ideas**. Paul borrowed concepts like ‘*logos*’ and ‘*sophia*’ from the Hellenistic-Jewish thought. This strategy attracted the people of the Hellenic world who were philosophically bent. Similarly, the people in Hellenic society would understand Jesus as ‘Lord’ better than as the Jewish ‘Messiah’.
3. Paul had an amazing skill in **weaving many strands of thought** of his age in which he lived into an integrated whole, e.g. from Stoicism, Judaic thought, mystery cults. But he never faltered in his orthodoxy or fidelity.
4. Paul drew images from the world of **Roman life**, e.g., athletics, wrestling, military service. As Jesus had taken his images from the Galilean countryside, Paul did from Roman city life.
5. There was a change of attitude to religion among the Roman intellectuals in that period. Belief in multiple gods did not

satisfy them; on the other hand, the philosophies proposed by the intellectuals were too distant from world of the masses. Paul combined **what was best in both**: a personal God, ethical teaching, social codes, community worship, a dimension of mystery, and in-depth relationship with the Ultimate Reality.

## 8. Be Prepared for Opposition

“ ..... as witnesses and martyrs they tell us of "the power of the word" (Rom 1:16), origin of their faith, of their hope and of their love for God and for men” ( The Final Message, Synod on the Word 2008)

Let us look at the reality that confronts the Church worker in Asia today. Aside from the trend of secularization in the economy-led globalized world (look at the media, political arena, social life), there is in Asia a **strong opposition** to what is described as ‘proselytization’. In India the word ‘conversion’ with whatever meaning the user has in his mind, is identified as the most heinous organized crime that Christians are systematically engaged in. There are countries in Asia where there is government restriction or planned opposition from dominant communities to any form of propagation of religion, others still where even any activity beyond social service (educational, health and developmental) is strictly forbidden, and others again into which missionaries cannot even enter, let alone initiate any form of Christian work. In such situations what we say is ‘**Be Creative**’.

The first temptation we have in the face of such opposition is to give up: to give up the sharing the Word and limit ourselves to whatever is acceptable to the powers that rule the country or forces that control the destinies of communities. But that is not the Christian answer. It is precisely in such situations that people need a Word that gives Life, energy, motivation. The Apostles in their time acted differently. Many great missionaries in their days had the skill not only of blunting opposition and warding off persecution, but also of continuing the work in **creatively new ways**.

If faith was shared even under totalitarian regimes in Russia, China and Vietnam, it should be possible anywhere in the world. That is being creative. We do not ask 'whether', we only ask 'how' we may do it. We explore ways, study methods, watch those who succeeded, learn from churches that have gone ahead, correct mistakes, soften rigidities, remain flexible, and re-model prevalent patterns to suit the occasion, the region and the community concerned. "All things are possible to the one who believes".

## 9. Give Greater Attention to Responsive Areas, Communities

"All that God did in the midst of his chosen people revealed what he intended to do for all humanity" (Ecclesia in Oceania 16).

Having spoken about difficulties in Asia, let us not fail to take note of the great things that have been taking place despite this during the last century and even during the last few decades. Impressive Catholic communities have grown up in Korea, many islands of Indonesia, Northeast India, North Myanmar, North Thailand, Vietnam, China and many **tribal pockets** of Asia. Tribal communities (those known differently in different places as indigenous people, ethnic minorities, mountain people) seem to be saying "Sir, we want to see Jesus". They seem to be eager to know Jesus and are open to the Word of Life.

## 10. Crossing Cultural Borders

"The Synod Fathers asked that the Church in Oceania develop an understanding and presentation of the truth of Christ drawing on the **traditions and cultures** of the region" (Ecclesia in Oceania 16)

"...that future priests, deacons and catechists be thoroughly familiar with the **culture** of the people they are to serve ... They are called to a service of inculturated evangelisation..." (Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture 1999, Pontifical Council for Culture)

We said earlier, begin from where you are. But we must go beyond, attempt new things, have courage, try even the impossible. And when we try to go beyond the set borders, we become aware of the reality of 'culture' and the challenge of

cultural differences. Notice how the **Gospel crossed cultural borders** in different periods of history: Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman, the Syro-phoenician woman, and the Roman officer; St. Paul addressing the Athenians, Roman officers, indigenous people of Asia Minor and the islands; St. Patrick preaching to the Celts, St. Boniface to the Saxons, St. Francis Xavier to the fisherfolk of Malabar Coast, Fr. Lievens to the tribal people of Chota Nagpur in India. Those missionaries who quickly identified themselves with the community to whom they were addressing the 'Word of Life', won a hearing; they led many to the Christian faith, and built up self-reliant Churches. Faith developed new forms of expressing itself in thought, art, music, organization and other cultural self-expressions that edified the rest of the Universal Church.

Some of the earliest documents of the FABC had expressed the view that the Church would be successful in her mission on this Continent only if she carried it out in **dialogue with the poor, the cultures** and the religions of Asia. There has been much reflection on socio-cultural realities and even on the multi-religious situation in Asia. But we need to give more attention to the multi-cultural scenario that Asia presents in most places when sharing the 'Word of Life' in Asia. That is why the Inculturation of the Word is important. Let us give a brief thought to this important theme:

*Final message of 'Word of God Synod' 2008*

The Bible, as it is commonly said, is "the great code" of **universal culture**: artists ideally dipped their paintbrush in that alphabet coloured by stories, **symbols**, and figures which are the biblical pages. **Musicians** composed their harmonies around the sacred texts, especially the Psalms. For centuries **authors** went back to those old stories that became existential parables; poets asked themselves about the mystery of the spirit, infinity, evil, love, death and life, frequently collecting poetical quivers that enlivened the biblical pages. **Thinkers**, men of learning and society itself frequently used the spiritual and ethical concepts (for example the Decalogue) of the word of God as a reference, even if merely in contrast. Even when the figure or the idea present in the Scriptures was deformed, it was recognized as being an essential and constitutive element of our civilization....

Therefore the Church must make the values that the word of God offers to all **cultures** shine, so they may be purified and fruitful. As John Paul II said to the Bishops of Kenya during his trip to Africa in 1980, "**inculturation** will truly be a reflection of the Incarnation of the Word, when a **culture**, transformed and regenerated by the gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought".

*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, by the Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, Pg. 117,*

"**Inculturation** of the Bible has been carried out from the first centuries, both in Christian East and in the Christian West, and it has proved very fruitful. However, one can never consider it a task achieved. It must be taken up again and again, in relationship to the way in which **cultures** continue to evolve. In countries of more recent evangelization, the problem arises in somewhat different terms".

"Every **authentic culture**, in fact, is in its own way the bearer of universal values established by God".

"This conviction springs from the Bible itself, which, right from the book of Genesis, adopts a universalist stance(Gen1:27-28), maintains it subsequently in the blessing promised to **all peoples** through Abraham and his offspring(Gen 12:3;18:18) and confirms it definitely in extending to "all nations" the proclamation of the Christian Gospel(Matt 28:18-20; Rom 4:16;Eph 3:6)".

## **11. Inculturation is about Touching the Inner Genius of a Community**

"It is the Church's task to bring the Good News of salvation to **all cultures** and present it in a way that corresponds to the **genius** of each people" (John Paul II, Delhi, 1.2.1986).

"...Catholicism accepts, respects and puts to use the **genius** of each people..." (Ecclesia in Oceania 17).

Asia is known for a multiplicity of little cultures in every country, even under the shadow of the great and ancient civilizations. Therefore, our eagerness to share the 'Word of Life' will need to

pay attention to the cultural assets of even smaller ethnic groups just as we take into account the great civilizational heritage of larger societies. This will mean offering the Gospel according to the **native genius** of each community so that people receive and express their faith in a manner fully in keeping with their own cultural identity.

When this process takes place successfully, the original genius of the community is awakened to new possibilities, culture is further enriched, and faith finds expression in amazingly new and beautiful ways. In this process the lay faithful evidently play an important role. It is in them that culture is vibrant.

## 12. Making the Message Intelligible and Acceptable

“The Word made flesh is foreign to no culture and must be preached to **all cultures**” (Ecclesia in Oceania 16)

“Every authentic **culture**, in fact, is in its own way the bearer of universal values established by God”.

(Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, by the Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, 117)

“The Church respects the religions and **cultures** of peoples, and, in its encounter with them, wishes to preserve everything that is noble, true and good in their religions and cultures” (Pastoral Attention to Traditional Religions, Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 21.11.93)

During the first stages of sharing the Word, the effort is to make its content *intelligible and acceptable* to the community to which the Gospel is being addressed. The announcer of the Word acquires competence not only in the local language but also in the use of images and symbols that make meaning to the local community. He/she immerses himself/herself into the **inner world of the community** (worldviews, mindsets, collective psyche, depth perceptions) and learns to look at the world from a new perspective. He/she begins to think in indigenous categories and seek to present his message using concepts and symbols that the local community can identify with. He takes the task of communicating the message forward relating it to **current realities**: to current events, prevalent social processes, prevailing



customs, beliefs, local ethos, traditions; statements and activities of national and regional leaders. He adopts local ways of interacting with people.

The teacher of the 'Word of Life' does not ignore even the **prejudices and social weaknesses** prevalent in that community, seeking to evoke thought and self-criticism in the community, thus assisting them to move to self-correction. *"When that power (of the Gospel) enters into a culture, it is not surprise that it rectifies many elements"* (Catechesi Tradendae 53).

### **13. Drawing from the Cultural and Historical Heritage and from the Ethical traditions of a Community**

"...the translation of biblical texts cannot, however, ensure by itself a thorough **inculturation**. Translation has to be followed by *interpretation*, which should set the biblical message in more explicit relationship with the ways of feeling, thinking, living and self expression which are proper to the **local culture**. From interpretation, one passes then to the other stages of **inculturation**, which leads to the formation of a local Christian culture, extending to all aspects of life (prayer, work, social life, customs, legislation, arts and sciences, philosophical and theological reflection ).... Total fidelity to the person of Christ, to the dynamic of his paschal mystery and to his love for Church, make it possible to avoid two false solutions: a superficial "adaptation" of the message, on the one hand, and a syncretistic confusion on the other" (Ad Gentes 22) ("Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, pages 117- 119)

The strength and sturdiness of the powerful **cultures** and **civilizations** of the dominant societies of Asia will continue to remain a challenge and an assistance for the sharer of the 'Word of Life'. Their philosophical and spiritual wisdom, religious traditions, ascetic practices, and patterns of life are of immense value for humanity. Their resistance today to secularization, their nearness to Catholic ethical principles in the area of bio-ethics and social and family values, tell us that we have much to share with them. They are not rivals or competitors, but **partners**. Dealing with them we are stepping on sacred ground, and we need to go ahead cautiously and respectfully. They can help us to preserve abiding values for the whole of humanity.

The one who announces the Word esteems the **values** specially cherished in each community (e.g. religiosity, love for the family, loyalty to the community, detachment, esteem for renunciation). The best interpreters in these matters are the lay faithful themselves. The core values prevalent in the community open the doors wider for the Gospel. He/she calls upon the memories of historic events that are always alive in the hearts and minds of the local community: their social and cultural achievements, national or cultural heroes or poets. He searches for symbolisms that have a special association in the **community's subconscious**: He prizes the *art and literature* that form a part of the *historical heritage* of the people.

He helps the community in its **struggle against social evils** making full use of the cultural and resources and spiritual traditions available within the community. He takes to the native ways of expressing religious sentiments and accepts all elements of value into Christian living and the prayer-traditions of the Christian community. Thus the Word of God comes alive.

As the believing community moves ahead, the lay people play even greater role seeking to express the more profound religious truths it has been accepting and personalizing in concepts derived from its own cultural heritage. Inculturation "must involve the whole people of God, and not a few experts, since the people reflect the authentic sense fidei" (Redemptoris Missio 54). And I may add that it is precisely in the community that culture is most vibrant. People will be inclined spontaneously to express their faith and worship in **symbols that appeal to their collective psyche**. This would open out doors for new persons who are beginning to show interest in the Faith too.

"Missionaries, in fact, cannot help bringing the Word of God in the form in which it has been inculturated in their own country of origin. New local churches have to make every effort to convert this foreign form of *biblical inculturation* into another form more closely corresponding to the *culture* of their own land ("Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, pages 117- 119).

## 14. Inculturation touches art, music, symbolisms, thought patterns

“...by **Inculturation**, the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures, and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures into her own community” (Redemptoris Missio 52)

“...Oceania offers many examples of unique **cultural expressions** in the areas of theology, liturgy and use of religious symbols” (Ecclesia in Oceania 16)

“...if the local Church has sunk deep roots into the indigenous culture in most areas of life, if it has made good progress in the use of **local art, music, symbolisms, thought patterns**, ways of expression and communication, both in the private sphere and social life, the indigenous culture flows spontaneously into prayer-life as well. It is here that the lay faithful contribute most of all.

....Religious gatherings seem to be the re-living of the community's ancient traditions. **Greetings** are done in the traditional fashion of the community. **Celebrations** have a local glow, decorations a local colour. Local musical instruments come to glorify the Lord. **Dances**, puppet shows, story-telling and other folk art recount the Biblical stories and lives of saints. Even non-Christian neighbours begin to represent Gospel stories in local communication forms. **Catechism** is taught to children using indigenous teaching methods. Relationships within the family (husband and wife, parents and children, elders and younger persons, men and women) adhere to the community's inherited and wise traditions. So too relationships among neighbours. **Contribution** to the Church and to charity is done following local ways of showing generosity. Forms of **penance** that Christians spontaneously adopt remind one of religious renunciations and austerities traditional in native cultures. Family devotions show a continuity with inherited forms of religiosity. There is also continuity between worship and life. **Legislation and living styles** will be influenced by the Word of Life.

Popular religiosity often serves as a starting point: e.g. visits to pilgrim centres, special devotions, fasts, forms of sacrifice like long barefoot walking, ways of showing respect, words and

gestures expressing gratitude, manner of expressing joy or sorrow, and spontaneous ways in which people try to reach out to the Ultimate.

## 15. Many Persons are Culturally Uprooted in this Globalized World

In this globalized world, in fact, you will find too many uprooted people: for example, many Asians who have generally had a western education; those whose reading, training, updating, association (through travels, contacts, discussions, domicile) have been from the same source; those driven excessively by **alien philosophies and ideologies** or programmes of action; those of the clergy and religious who have studied or worked a long time abroad; those whose congregations are labouring in other countries in a big way.

Such persons may discover that they are partially or wholly uprooted people as far their relationship with their own cultures are concerned. While they too can make very effective contribution to the cause of Inculturation, they will need to make sure that they are **culturally reinserted** into their society and share *emotional vibrations* with the masses, and more specifically with the believing community at whose service they are.

“...mobility and the **migratory phenomenon**, which opens new prospects of evangelization...” (Proposition 38, Synod on the Word 2008).

“...it is hoped that in each **cultural region** centers of formation will be established for the laity and for missionaries of the Word, where they learn to understand, live and proclaim the Word of God” (Proposition 33, Synod on the Word 2008).

## 16. Difficulties may be Many, Yet Consensus is Possible

“Hence, the synodal fathers encourage a dialogue between the Bible and **culture...**” (Proposition 41, Synod on the Word 2008)

We need not deny the difficulties that lie ahead. Persons who are specially endowed with creativity in thought may not be equally gifted when dealing with a sensitive issue like culture. *Social*

*activists* and *justice-fighters* (feminists, environmentalists, Marxists) not rarely develop a blind eye to the niceties of cultural differences. They find it difficult to enter into the *emotional world of culture* and listen to the *language of the heart*. Charismatic preachers at times take their message to extremes and hurt quite unconsciously the cultural sensitivities of different communities.

In a multicultural society one needs to be particularly careful. There are situations too where many ethnic groups live side by side in a given area of a parish; where one cultural group is in a dominant position in reference to another; where one is oppressive of another; where two are in tense relationships. While, theoretically, borrowing elements from a local culture is a welcome idea, in a situation of complex relationships, one needs to proceed with care. An effort towards *mutual concessions* and ultimate *consensus* will be found most useful.

In this context, it may be good to point out also how some persons, by their sheer genius, **transcend cultures**. Mother Teresa was one such. She belonged to all persons of all cultures. Her sisters attending the basic needs of the 'poorest of the poor' have developed the skill of coming close to people faster than any other international agency (say, Red Cross, Boy scouts, UNESCO, Peace Corps, World Vision). Nevertheless, when the work begins to organize itself, they too need to accommodate to different **cultures** to be acceptable and effective.

## **17. Inculturation Experts: those who Stir the Collective Unconscious of Communities**

“(Inculturation) means the penetration of the deepest strata of persons and peoples by the Gospel which touches them deeply, going to ‘the very **centre and root**’ of their cultures (General Directory of Catechesis 109).

This is another area where the lay people excel. For, much assistance comes from a community’s *artists, poets, composers, other culturally sensitive persons*, and especially those *who can stir the collective unconscious* of their communities. For, they have developed their *imaginative faculties* and keep them *in tune with the cultural waves* that are going through their society and constantly cultivate their *intuitive skills*. They can open out new

doors for people searching for the Faith, because they Inculturate the Faith first of all in their own hearts and minds.

From them, initiatives for Inculturation flow spontaneously. Even when they break from tradition and move in new directions, they retain their roots in the deeper cultural identity of their society, and consequently win its wholehearted support. They are able to **dialogue with the subconscious** of their society and **whisper the Gospel to its soul**. In this way, Inculturation turns out to be a *stimulus to Evangelization*, not an obstacle. It does not become a contentious issue, placing religious beliefs in question and leading communities on the way to uncertainties, but an experience of communicating joy in the Faith and confidence in the Message. *Serenity* qualifies the entire endeavour.

## 18. Asians as Missionaries in Asia and Elsewhere

First of all, many more **Asians** are coming out as **missionaries** to work in other continents and in other countries of Asia itself. They will need to give greater attention to the culture of the community that they serve and cultivate relationship with local cultural leaders, if they wish to be effective in their work. For, as we have said earlier, culture is linked with people's *deeper level identities, their historic memories, ethnic pride*; their collective psyche, community ambitions, motivations, shared fears and prejudices.

**Cultural insertion** into the larger society is important for missionaries and for the local Christian community for the effectiveness of their services (health, education, social development, evangelization). Individuals and communities who have not developed the skill for speedy cultural and social insertion into the local society, will find themselves not making progress in their work: they will not start belonging to a place and to a local community, and much less win a response; they will cause annoyance to the society which they intend to serve, aggravate tensions, and become helpless in times of crisis. This insertion that I speak of should have deep roots, and have wide reference not only to the immediate neighbourhood, but also to society as a whole.

## 19. The Present 'Anti-Christian Force' is not merely a Political Force' to be Resisted, but a 'Cultural Force' to be handled with Care

"For a genuine inculturation of the evangelical message, the formation of missionaries with adequate means must be ensured, to **know in-depth the vital ambience and the socio-cultural conditions**, so that they can be inserted in the environment, the language and the local cultures. It corresponds to the local Church in the first place to achieve a genuine inculturation of the evangelical message, paying attention of course to the risk of syncretism (Proposition 48, Synod on the Word 2008)

In the context of the recent harassment of Christians in certain Asian countries, I would like to make a brief reflection, not merely on the immediate issues connected with the happenings, but on the long term strategies for the Church in Asia in the fulfillment of her great mission on this vast Continent.

The so-called 'anti-Christian force' that is emerging strong in some of our countries is not merely a political force to be resisted, but a '**cultural force**' to be handled with care. While it seems to have developed basically in opposition to conversions and to the Christian work for the uplift of the poor, it may also be considered a *cultural self-affirmation of a society* 'taken to fanatical extremes'.

This form of **cultural self-affirmation** is a conservative reaction of a civilization (society) to things that seem to threaten its central identity by appealing to its own original sources of inspiration and motivating traditions. Unfortunately, as it is, the movement has been captured by politically motivated people, who in turn have handed it over to muscle-men who are being trained systematically to harass and oppose their imaginary 'enemies', the Christians. Even if we win many legal battles in the court or in the international for a through publicity, these may bring some immediate relief but will not offer a lasting solution. The force will remain on, and if humiliated, it will grow in strength and aggressiveness.

What I am going to suggest may sound impossible even undesirable. All I urge is that it remains our ultimate goal. We

will one day find a way towards it. So my suggestion is that, 1) Our political opponents will have to be tackled politically, 2) those who physically harm us or socially harass us will have to be confronted with the arm of the law. 3) But those who provide the philosophy for the movement and those who oppose us precisely because they feel we are *religious and cultural aliens* as they describe us, will need to be tackled differently. Our efforts for **Dialogue and Inculturation** will touch a peak point when we will know how to talk to these persons.

In any case, I would strongly urge, **never threaten the selfhood of communities**. Selfhood is the most precious treasure they have.... their individuality; their self pride, their unique heritage. It is important to show absolute respect to this selfhood. If anything we do appears like a threat to the selfhood of a community, resistance is inevitable. However, what stands at the heart of this selfhood is not easy to define. Is it ethnicity, culture, language, lifestyle, cuisine, philosophy, or religious system? Threat (real or perceived) to the selfhood of a community can lead to tensions, conflict, even war. In the religious context, it has led to heresies and schisms. Inculturation is about constant attention to this selfhood and contributing to its enhancement.

What lies at the heart of sharing the 'Word of Life' is precisely this: taking it not only to individuals but to the Soul (Self) of a community, society, culture, civilization. When we shall learn to share the 'Word of Life' in Asia in a way that does not seem to threaten its inner identity (its Self), we shall be at a turning point in our mission history. Inculturation has something to do with working towards that goal.

## **20. In the Difficult Day, we fall back on Our Culture, Our Faith**

"...this Synod reaffirms the **urgency of the mission** "ad gentes" also in our time -- a proclamation that must be explicit, made not only within our churches but everywhere and must be accompanied by a coherent testimony of life, which makes the content evident and reinforces it" (Proposition 49, Synod on the Word 2008)



Persons of every tradition in every part of the world return to their cultural resources for the renewal of their motivation and the recharging of their collective energies. It is in this context, that we Christians, while tapping the cultural resources of our ancient civilization, have the possibility of drawing strength also from the **ultimate sources of our religious faith**. When people discuss current issues and subject them to **public reasoning**, it may be that we have **something unique to offer**, unique to us as Christians. What we feel is unique according to our convictions, is happily offered to our fellow-citizens as an option that is worth considering. It is not the question of imposing ideas, but of proposing possibilities.

## 21. Offer a 'Come and See' Invitation

"Our gaze is turned lovingly towards all those engaged in study, catechists and the other **servants of the word of God** to express our most intense and cordial gratitude for their precious and important ministry" (The Final Message, Synod on the Word 2008)

This is the time when you may make a 'come-and-see' proposal. You suggest, 'Come, let us explore these ideas deeper. Weigh reasons and make your decision. Come and see the person who has inspired these ideas. His name is Jesus of Nazareth'. Allow persons to go beyond the superficial levels of relationships with you, and make it possible for them to enter into the **inner chambers of your personal convictions**. Generally Indians (Asians) will begin to talk of serious things to you only when they notice in you this depth-dimension: that your convictions have depth and that they are based on deep religious experiences, a depth that comes from an encounter with Jesus.

## 22. Speak about Jesus

"In an age dominated by images put forward, in particular, by hegemonic means of communication such as television, the privileged **model of Christ is still meaningful and evocative today**" (The Final Message, No 11, Synod on the Word 2008)

"The guards replied, 'No one has ever spoken like this man'" (7:44-46).

Here is the essence of sharing the Word of Life. Speak about Jesus. Let people experience the power of his words. Let them be charmed by his personality. Help them to reshape their inner world and personal conduct after his central teachings. Let them gaze on him who is crucified. Let their hearts exult in wonder at the experience of the power of his resurrection. **Jesus is irresistible.** Despite all that we may do, the definitive choice of Jesus is always a miracle. But miracles do happen. And they happen through you and me!

### **III. THE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD**

#### **- PREACHING THE WORD OF GOD IN LITURGY**

- *Bishop Vincent Ri*

#### **Introduction**

Dear co-workers in the field of the Lord, the topic given to me is "the Proclaiming the Word, particularly the Preaching of the Word in Liturgy." As the bishops reaffirmed in the last synod, the liturgy is the privileged place in which the Word of God is fully expressed, and for the majority of Christians, it is the only occasion to hear the Word of God. So I will concentrate on the preaching in the liturgy.

For this, I will first summarize what I read from some article or books and especially what I heard from some interventions including those of you here present. After that, I will share some of my experiences with regard to the topic we are to treat now.

#### **1. Biblical fundamentalism and its challenge - an article by Lucien Legrand ([Dei Verbum] n.70-71, 1-2/2004)**

First of all, I would like to present you an article I found in our bulletin [Dei Verbum] in 2004. The article was entitled "Fundamentalism and the Bible" and the author was Father Lucien Legrand, a French priest and professor of New Testament at St. Peter's Pontifical Institute in Bangalore, India. What struck me most was section II entitled <Dialogue and Challenge>. To understand my reaction to this article, it is perhaps useful to take into consideration the situation the Korean Catholic Church finds itself with regard to other religions and with the Protestant

churches in particular. As you know, in Korea there are many religious traditions in relatively peaceful coexistence. Buddhism, different denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism, and other religions of local origin. In almost all religious traditions, the fundamentalism does not provoke serious problem. On the contrary, this situation in which no religion is predominant can be seen as positive for the health of all the religious traditions. And one of the most positive aspects of this situation is that we can make comparison among them, and learn one from the other without complex. In this situation, I remark many differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, the strong and the weak points in each Christian tradition.

In this perspective, what Father Lucien Legrand had written was for me particularly significant: "Whichever may be the failings of fundamentalism, the fact is that it is there and that it exercises a great appeal on people. It is not enough to diagnose the problem. **It must also be approached positively in a spirit of dialogue and as a challenge which questions us.** Here also we must distinguish between the ideology and the people who uphold it. People are often better than their mental constructs. They must be approached as human beings, with empathy and sympathy for their concerns and their sense of insecurity. As for the ideology itself, it may embody positive values. As the saying goes, a heresy is a truth that has gone astray. But if it has gone its one-sided way, it was because, on the other side, it had been too one-sidedly overlooked.

Making an allusion to the people steeped in the fundamentalism, this author writes : "**The Spirit is at work in the individuals, in their moving attachment to the Bible and their eagerness to find in it comfort and guidance. It is at work also in their restlessness and anxieties, their quest for meaning in a confused and confusing world.**"(p. 12).

What was most interesting for me in the article was the part devoted to the comparison with the Protestants. Under the subtitle <Return to the text>, he writes : "**As said commonly, Protestants read the Bible; Catholics, if at all, speak about the Bible. They have memorized large portions of it; we cannot quote a verse properly.** It is true that their memorizing is often highly selective; they have their 'canon within the canon', sometimes anti-Catholic. **But at least the Word is part of their mental equipment to face life's problems.**"

Under the subtitle, <Return to the incantatory power of the text>, he goes on to write: **“Protestants quote the Bible; Catholics extract abstract themes supposed to be biblical. A typical example of this tendency to reduce the Bible message to abstraction can be seen in a certain type of homily, all too frequent. In his preparation, if any, the preacher reads the Sunday pericope, reduces it to a certain ‘theme’ and goes on developing the themes without any further reference to the Bible text.** If the Sunday pericope is about the ‘prodigal son’, we decide that ‘the theme of today’s Gospel’ is God’s paternal love, or the sacrament of reconciliation or contrition and launch into an oral dissertation on the selected topic. Still worse is the type of pseudo-homily that serves as introduction to the liturgy in which the Gospel passage, which has not yet been proclaimed, is presented under a few or many! abstract sentences often in the impersonal form of the indirect speech. ‘In today’s Gospel Jesus says that we should, etc.’ or ‘Jesus speaks about, etc.’ **Jesus, the great storyteller, is made (thus) to speak in the tedious tone of poor moralizing or lifeless dissertation.** If in addition, we go on making a display of memory by quoting chapter and verse, **we reduce the power of the Word to abstract algebra.**

The author concludes by these words: “Words have an incantatory power, especially the words of the inspired prophets and the words of the Word. I am not advocating a kind of magic power of the Bible which would bring us back to the idolatry of the book. I just recall the insights of present-day biblical scholarship on rhetorical approach to the Scriptures. The distinction between ‘form’ and ‘contents’ is artificial. Very often the form is the contents as in poetry and in music. A page of Amos cannot be reduced to the flat ‘God warns us against injustice’ ; a psalm is not just ‘praise of the power of God’ ; parables of Jesus are not just the illustration of a theme, would it be the ‘love of God.’ Authentic language has an evocative, creative power. **Heidegger says that ‘language is the house of being.’ In a Christian perspective, the Word is the house of the Spirit.”**

## **2. The results of the Preaching in Catholic and Protestant Churches**

The comparison between Catholic and Protestant ministers with regard to the preaching, reminds me of a remarkable phenomenon which takes place in Latin America.

According to a survey recently published in a Brazilian daily newspaper, the number of Brazilian Catholics is steadily decreasing since 1980. Of the total population, the Catholic people represented 95.2% in 1940, and 73.8% in 2000. As for the year 2010, the survey is under process, and many people think that the Catholic population will be revealed under 70%.

**This rapid decrease in the Catholic population is contrasted with no less rapid increase in the Protestant population during the same period in Brazil.** Protestants represented 2.6% in 1940, but in the year 2000 the percentage arose to 15.4%. And many people think that in 2010, it will be around 20%.

We suppose that this phenomenon is common in almost all the countries of Latin America. **And if we, Catholics, do not take a drastic measure in this situation, this tendency will be generalized almost everywhere in the World.** Then, what is the main reason for it? And what is the remedy to this problem?

With regard to these questions, Most Rev. Walmor OLIVEIRA DE AZEVEDO, Archbishop of Belo Horizonte, BRAZIL, said : The fifth Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate, reflecting on the challenges of the mission, with particular regard to the exodus of many Catholics from the Church, concludes: **"In reality, many who cross over to other religious groups do not wish to abandon our Church, but they are genuinely searching for God and His Word."** (...)

And, Bishop Oliveira himself poses the questions : **Why didn't the performance of the Word touch them while they were Catholics? What have they found in these sects that they did not find before in our communities?** The Bishop from Brazil goes on to ask himself and all of us : **On the other hand, the fact that all of these people hunger and thirst for God and His Word makes us ask ourselves if we are lacking apostles of the Good News of Christ who are able to go out and meet the needs of these many faithful.**

To this, I would say: **Yes, we are lacking apostles of the Good News of Christ who are able to go out and meet the needs of these many faithful.** To find an effective remedy to the

lamentable situation, we must begin by being frank and recognizing this lack. In relation to this problem, I would like to quote a part of the intervention of H. E. Card. Godfried DANNEELS, Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussel, President of the Episcopal Conference (BELGIUM): The obstacles found in the proclamation of the Word are many: difficulties in communication in secularized culture and environment, resistance and ignorance by the listeners. **But perhaps the greatest obstacle is in the heart of the evangelist himself: his lack of self-confidence and his ignorance about the laws in announcing the Gospel, which are different from those of the world.**

Now, where is the answer or remedy to this situation?

In the Relation of the working group English B in the synod gives us a clue to the answer: **"We have the need to understand what is attracting people to the Sects and learn from them. The other point is, how preaching might be improved and made more vibrant."** I think that learning from other Christian traditions and improving the preaching are almost one and same. If we Catholics have one thing to learn from the Protestant Pastors, I think it is just the preaching.

### **3. The tradition of good homily based on the salvation history**

If many Catholics leave the church to join other Christian denominations and sects, it is mainly because they cannot hear the Word of God in our Church. If they cannot hear the Word of God in Catholic Church, it is because we are lacking apostles of the Good News of Christ who are able to go out and properly meet the needs of these faithful. Again, **if we lack apostles of the Good News of Christ, it is because in the formation program of the future priests something important is lacking, as many bishops indicated at the last synod.** And this is not a problem which arose today.

According to a theologian (Jean Mereau, commentaries on Co. Vat. II documents, 6 vols.; vol. 5, chap.1, I. 3. c. b) Homily/ history of homily, p. 170 (Korean trans.), ever since the death of Pope Gregory I who died in 604, **the Church has not developed the traditional way of good homily based on the salvation history.** In other words, if I say in a somewhat schematic way, the church has lost the traditional way of good homily based on the Holy Scripture for one thousand and four hundred years. And it

was only Co. Vat. II with the publication of the Constitution Dei Verbum that has adopted new policy of preaching based on the Word of God. But as the bishops recognized in the last synod, this policy is far from being fully implemented on the pastoral places. Even now most of the seminaries have almost the same formation program as before.

#### 4. St. Paul, declared model of all preachers

Perhaps, for a long time, we have forgotten the teaching of **St. Paul, declared model of the preachers by Pope Benedict XV in 1917.** (The pope at that time, said that St. Paul was the model of the preachers for three aspects : He preached after deep reflection; His preaching was always based on the paschal mystery of Jesus the Christ; He was exemplary because of his way of preaching.) The Apostle of the Nations writes in the first letter to the Corinthians : "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with **the wisdom of human eloquence**, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy **the wisdom of the wise**, and the learning of the learned I will set aside.'"(1 Cor 1, 17-19)

St. Paul goes on, in chapter 2, to express the same position about his own preaching : "My message and my proclamation were not with **persuasive [words of] wisdom**, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on **human wisdom** but on the power of God...We have not received **the spirit of the world** but the Spirit of God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. And we speak about them not with **words taught by human wisdom**, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms."(1Co 4-5; 12-13)

Perhaps, for a long time, we have been too much preoccupied by, to use the pauline expressions, **the wisdom of human eloquence, the wisdom of the wise, persuasive [words of] wisdom, human wisdom, the spirit of the world, words taught by human wisdom.**

The intervention of Most Rev. Evarist PINTO, Archbishop of Karachi (Pakistan) was very significant in this sense: The Prophet Amos speaks of the famine of hearing the Word of God (Am 8,11). Many Catholics today hunger and thirst for the Word of God. In

our Country, Pakistan, more than 60% are illiterate and thus are unable to read the Holy Bible, yet they long to hear the Word of God. **On the other, many people achieve greater results in academics but are illiterate with regard to the Word of God. So many of our people including Priests and Consecrated persons are experts in secular subjects but are unable to impart the sublime knowledge of the Bible to the people who hunger and thirst for the Word of God.**

Perhaps while the Priests and Consecrated persons were making every efforts to become experts in secular subjects or even in sacred fields, they were losing the simplicity of heart belonging to the little ones, the main gate to the sublime knowledge of the Word of God.

### 5. The teaching of Pope Benedict XVI

Here I would like to quote somewhat large part of [Jesus of Nazareth] by Pope Benedict XVI, p.339

(p. 339-340) - To begin with, let us examine this messianic *Jubelruf (joyful shout)* : "At that time Jesus declared, **'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little ones (babes);** yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son will to reveal him"(Mt 11,25-27; Lk 10,21-22).

"No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known"(Jn 1,18). (p. 340)

p.342 : "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me so wills" (Jn 6,44). But whom does the Father will? Not "the wise and understanding", the Lord tells us, but the simple.

Taken in the most straightforward sense, these words reflect Jesus' actual experience: It is not the Scripture experts, those who are professionally concerned with God, who recognize him; they are too caught up in the intricacies of their detailed knowledge. Their great learning distracts them from simply gazing upon the whole, upon the reality of God as he reveals himself - for people who know so much about the complexity of the issues, it seems that it just cannot be so simple. Paul describes this same experience and then goes on to reflect upon it: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,



**but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart' (Is 29,14)....For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong..so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1Cor 1,18f., 26-29). "Let no one deceive himself, If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise"(1Cor 3,18). What, though, is meant by "becoming a fool", by being "a little one", through which we are opened up for the will, and so for the knowledge, of God?**

**The sermon on the Mount provides the key that discloses the inner basis of this remarkable experience and also the path of conversion that opens us up to being drawn into the Son's filial knowledge: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"(Mt 5,8). Purity of heart is what enables us to see. Therein consists the ultimate simplicity that opens up our life to Jesus's will to reveal. (p. 343, 1st par.)**

## **6. When we are free from the temptation of the human wisdom**

**When we are free from the preoccupation or rather from the temptation of the human wisdom, humanly persuasive explanation and have the simplicity of heart, we are ready to adopt the adequate way to preach.**

**- Instead of talking too much about the Word of God, we let the Word of God speak for itself. Thus instead of being possessors of the Word, we become the disciples and servants of it.**

**- Usually it is enough to recite the biblical passage with minimum of explanation to apply it to the "Here and Now" of the audience. "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" says the Lord.**

**- In this manner, we let the Spirit work in his own way, letting the Word become spirit and life (Cf. Jn 6,63). We must recognize the limit of our preaching in words and let the Spirit do his work. The Lord said: "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth" (Jn 16,12-13).**

## 7. My personal experiences

Now I would like to share my own experiences.

When I was young priest, the responsibility of preaching was so burdensome that I was thinking that I would rather prefer to go to Soviet Union as a missionary. I knew that in that case, I would almost certainly be captured by communists and be executed. But I thought that at least I would die as priest. Then why did I feel so heavy deep in my conscience? I think the most important reason was that I had to say to the people to do the things I myself could not do. And the second reason was that I had to construct the preaching on a chosen theme and develop it with every argumentation that even for myself was not so convincing and touching, because it remained in my head and not in my heart.

But now I am totally free from these psychological and spiritual burdens and I am ready to preach if it is in Korean in whatever situation or occasions. What made me so radically changed?

What I would like to share and reflect upon with you is precisely this question. In Korea, there are many protestant pastors who are very popular and attract a big number of people. And among the protestant Christians we can very easily meet the people who are ready to go anywhere in the world as missionaries. The situation in Catholic Church is contrasted in many aspects with that of Protestant Church. What is the main factor that makes this difference? Everyone knows in Korea, that it is the preaching of the ministers. The concrete example of the type of preaching in Protestant and Catholic Church illustrated by Father Lucien Legrand in the article I presented to you just a moment ago is literally true in my country.

This question had been a serious challenge for me as a Christian and as a pastor. **Therefore, right from the beginning of my episcopal life in 1990, I decided to memorize the whole biblical texts of daily mass. In doing this, I have had really precious experiences and I believe that I have finally found one of the best ways to realize the teaching of Co. Vat. II when it says "all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture" (DV n. 21).**

To memorize, I arise at half past 4 in the morning, and until 6 o'clock when I celebrate daily mass, I try to memorize and meditate on the Scripture passages of the day, and after the mass, for one and half hours, I take a walk in a little mountain just

beside the bishop's house, carrying in my hand a bible of small format or a sheet of paper with biblical passages printed on it. When I practice this, I realize the meaning of **the saying of St. Ambrose** : "When I read the Holy Scripture, the Lord comes down and walk with me in the earthly paradise." I would like to replace the word "read" by "memorize" or "learn by heart". Then we can be much more sure of being accompanied by the Lord, the Holy Spirit who changes the letter into the spirit, into the light and power deep in our being.

## 8. Memorizing the Scripture passages

In fact, when we try to memorize some biblical passages, we experience that **it is not simply cerebral or intellectual exercises**. "It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6,63) says the Lord. But the words of the Lord are not always and for everyone spirit and life. Especially, when they are written on the paper, they have the risk of remaining letter without life. **For the words of the Lord to become spirit and life, we need the time to digest them as we need time to digest material bread to have it become power that supports our physical life**. When we memorize the biblical passages of the daily mass and some other important passages of the Bible, we experience that they connect by themselves one with the other, from the Old Testament passages to the New Testament passages. It is like seeing the card section or mass game which show different scenes according to the need or intention of the director. **Then we become like the master of a household of whom Jesus says in Mt. 13, 52 : "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."**

For the master of a household, to be able to bring out of his treasure what is new and what is old, **it is imperative first to let the Word of God pierce and penetrate deeply into his own heart**, as the letter to the Hebrews indicates : "The Word of God is alive and active. It cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword, piercing so deeply that it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it discriminates among the purposes and thoughts of the heart"(Heb. 4, 12) **If Mary is the model of all disciples of Christ, it is because she "treasured all these words and pondered them**

**in her heart** (Lk 2, 19; Cf Lk 2,51: his mother treasured up all these things in her heart)

Then we can compare such a minister of the word with a warrior well equipped with God's armor of which St. Paul says in the Ephesians (6, 11 ff.). After having presented 5 defensive weapons, the Apostle presents finally the only one offensive, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (16).

What Saint Paul wrote to Timothy, a local pastor, is one of the most important admonitions for all of us who are called for the ministry of the Word : "All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be upright. **This is how someone who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work**" (2 Tim. 3,16-17).

Saint Therese of Lisieux, declared Doctor of the Church, has arrived to that level of divine wisdom through a simple approach to the Word of God: **She learned by heart every biblical passages she came across**, particularly the biblical passages of daily mass and meditated thereupon all day long. She said to one of her sisters : "**To the simple people, no complicated means is necessary.**"

## **Conclusion**

"If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples; you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8,31: New Jerusalem Bible) says the Lord.

I am convinced that **if all the ministers of the Word memorize the Scripture passages of daily mass, and some other important passages from Old and New Testaments, and if they are thus equipped with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, then the Church will surely have a new spring time.**

## **IV. THE LIGHT IN OUR PATH IN THE ROADS OF THIS WORLD**

The Word of God and Societal Questions

- *Bishop Broderick Pabillo*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the Enlightenment, erroneously saw humanity as good by nature and as capable of evolving

endlessly. It believed that science, technology and development are the new realities that will replace religion completely. They are the new absolutes towards which humanity is marching. Recent tragic events in recent world history however shattered this evolutionist dream. There were the two disastrous world wars, the Russian revolution, the Chinese revolution, the horrors perpetrated by governments supporting national socialism, fascism, communism, and capitalism, the collapse of the great colonial empires, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the impending ecological disaster, and the financial crisis. ( cf. *The Good Earth, Reflections on Evangelization*, ed. Emilia Paola Pacelli, Pontifical Missionary Union, Rome, 2010 p. 90) All these developments have disoriented humanity's view of its self-made future.

These are further compounded by the new slaveries that raise their ugly heads and over which many feel helpless. There are the religious slaveries. "Religion, which should be an instrument for the reconciliation and communion of people with one another and with God, is often an instrument of power and an occasion for violent ethnic divisions. India, which sees its cultural homogeneity threatened, is using Hinduism, by nature tolerant, as an instrument of uniformity, carrying out a persecution against Christians and other religious minorities. From the East to the Middle East and to Africa there are various nations that, using the Islamic religion as an instrument, impose oppressive internal regimes, and cause conflicts and wars that become real genocides and leave no possibility of religious choice for Muslims or the minimum respect for the fundamental rights of the human person. There are millions of people who are enslaved by religious systems, and millions have died or become refugees, driven out of their homelands because of a different religious belief. This is one of the most serious forms of slavery that afflicts humanity today." (*ibid.* p 93)

The slavery of poverty. "Humanity is characterized by a dramatic division between North and South, between the former that consumes three quarters of the earth's resources, and the latter ( three quarters of humanity) that has access to only a quarter of these resources. The difference between the two parts, instead of decreasing, has increased dramatically in these times of

world crisis. **The causes can be ascribed to the world's perverse economic system, which is invoked as market economy** (*emphasis of the original*): free trade, the globalization of the economy, the repayment of capital, investments with enormous return of profits for those who possess the capital, international credit, and the consequent debts of poor countries. All these are, before being economic transactions, a cultural vision of the human being. It is the logic of power that is necessarily connected to the logic of money (capital)... Based on this logic the states and people who do not have must succumb, and in reality, do succumb: in international commerce, in access to international credits, and on a personal level the poor have to accept contracts that are real forms of usury." (*ibid.* p. 94) This same observation was already pointed out by Pope John Paul II at the turn of the millennium 10 years ago when he wrote: "Our world is entering the new millennium burdened by the contradictions of an economic, cultural and technological progress which offers immense possibilities to a fortunate few, while leaving millions of others not only on the margins of progress but in living conditions far below the minimum demanded by human dignity." (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* # 50)

It is in this kind of world now that the Church is sent to evangelize. The Message of the *Synod on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* (October 5-26, 2008) speaks of the **Roads of the Word**. This is the situation of the road that the Word of God must thread in our times. We are not deterred by this road, bumpy and unsure it may be. As Christians we take history seriously because it is the theater of God's action. This piece of human history is the theological place for the interpretation and realization of God's kingdom. It is in this time that the Church is called to evangelize. "The Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs... which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation." (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* #19)

We may be surprised at the gravity of evil that is in the world today. However the message of the Synod reminds us: "This

immense sigh of suffering that rises from the earth to heaven is continuously represented by the Bible, which proposes a historical and incarnated faith. It is enough to think only of the pages marked by violence and oppression, of the vehement pleas of the Psalms, of the subtle internal crisis that passes through the soul of Qoheleth, of the vigorous prophetic denunciations against social injustice." (13) In a word, evil has always been in the world and the Bible is no stranger to this *mystery of iniquity*. Hence we have such cries from the Scriptures as "*How long, Lord, will you forget me? Forever? How long will you turn away your face from me?*" (Ps 13,1). "*Why let people go on living in misery? Why give light to those in grief? They wait for death, but it never comes; they prefer a grave to any treasure.*" (Job 3, 20-21) Or let us take the complaint of the prophet Habakkuk which could well be the complain of any contemporary honest person: "*You are my God, holy and eternal...But how can you stand these treacherous, evil men? Your eyes are too holy to look at evil, and you cannot stand the sight of people doing wrong. So why are you silent while they destroy people who are more righteous than they are?*" ( Hab 1, 12-13). Jesus himself warns us of this presence of evil especially affecting the believer. "*You will be handed over to be punished and be put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. Many will give up their faith at that time; they will betray one another and hate one another. Then many false prophets will appear and fool many people. Such will be the spread of evil that many people's love will grow cold.*" (Mt 24, 9-12)

How are we to deal with this situation? Of the 55 propositions that the Synod Fathers submitted to the Holy Father, four deal directly with the social realities of the world. These are:

- Proposition 11: Word of God and Charity toward the Poor.
- Proposition 39: Word of God and Commitment in the World.
- Proposition 41: Word of God and culture
- Proposition 54: Cosmic Dimensions of the Word of God and Custody of Creation

These propositions, together with the Message that the Synod Fathers released on October 26, 2008, give some guidance on the

societal engagement of Christians with this world, our world. This guidance is culled from the Bible itself. What are the landmarks of this road that we have to take then that we can glean from the Scripture?

First, Scripture does not close its eyes to the reality of evil. It recognizes its presence and does not seek to escape from it. This is in contrast to some trends of thought, both ancient and modern, which would deny the reality of evil. For them evil is not real; it is but an illusion. So the effort is to get out of this illusion either by crowding away sadness, suffering and pain through immersion into sensual pleasure, or, through an opposite way, by delving into the inner self through meditation and self-denial. Others still simply shut out suffering and the problems of the world from their lives by living in their gated and exclusive enclaves. God in the Bible instead takes the full force of this reality of iniquity by unmasking and denouncing its causes. Hence we hear the strong words of the prophets, such as Ezekiel: *"Mortal man, tell the Israelites that their land is unholy, and so I am punishing it in my anger. The leaders are like lions roaring over the animals they have killed. They kill the people, take all the money and property they can get, and by their murders leave many widows."* (22, 24-25). In prophet Isaiah the people complained: *"Why should we fast and the Lord never notices? Why should we go without food if he pays no attention?"* (Is 58,3) The Lord answered them frankly, *"The truth is that at the same time you fast, you pursue your own interests and oppress your workers. Your fasting makes you violent, and you quarrel and fight. Do you think this kind of fasting will make me listen to your prayers?"* (Is 58, 3-4) The prophet Amos was unflinching with his words of denunciation: *"The Lord says, 'the people of Israel have sinned again and again, and for this I will certainly punish them. They sell into slavery honest people who cannot pay their debts, the poor who cannot repay even the price of a pair of sandals. They trample down the weak and helpless and push the poor out of the way.'"* (2, 6-7) Jesus was no exception to this. He severely criticized even the religious leaders of his people who make life difficult for them. *"How terrible for you teachers of the Law! You put onto people's backs loads which are hard to carry, but you yourselves will not stretch out a finger to help them carry those loads. How terrible for you!"* (Lk 11, 46-47)



Denunciation is not the only biblical response, though. A deeper one is the offer of comfort. God afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. While those who cause evil are denounced for the purpose of calling them to a change of heart, words of comfort are offered to the victims and to those who suffer. Unlike human justice which seeks only to punish the offender, God's justice is more directed to those who suffer. God gives them the assurance of his presence and his care. Their enemies may oppress them; their leaders may abandon them. God does not forget them. *"The people of Jerusalem said, 'the Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us.'" So the Lord answers, 'Can a woman forget her own baby and not love the child she bore? Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you. Jerusalem, I can never forget you! I have written your name on the palms of my hands.'"* (Is 49, 14-16) Jesus himself assures us, *"The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world!"* (Jn 16,33) Hence his invitation, *"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest"* (Mt 11,28-29) Christians are exhorted to do the same. *"God helps us in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God."* (2 Cor 1,4)

The comfort that we are enjoined to offer is not just consigned to mere words. The help is to be concrete. St James wrote: *"Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!' - if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead."* ( 2,15-17) Hence in the Scripture we have many passages that encourage helping the poor (cf. Lev 19,10; Deut 15,11; Ps 41,1-2; Tb 4, 7.16; Sir 7,10; 29,8; Lk 11, 41; Rom 15,26; Gal 2,10). In fact charity to the poor is one of the main tenets of Judaic and Christian faiths. Proposition 11 of the Synod states: *"One of the characteristic features of Sacred Scripture is the revelation of God's predilection for the poor (cf. Mt 25,31-46). Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God Incarnate, went through this world doing good (cf. Acts 10,35). The Word of God, willingly received, generates abundantly in the Church charity and justice towards all, above all towards the poor."*

Jesus proclaimed as his mission the words found in the prophet Isaiah, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord"* (Lk 4,18-19). Following the teachings and examples of her Lord, one of the preoccupations of the Early Church was to help the needy. St. Paul initiated the first international aid in Church history. He asked the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to help the Christians in Judea who at that time were suffering from famine. He wrote, *"If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you don't have. I am not trying to relieve others by putting a burden on you; but since you have plenty at this time, it is only fair that you should help those who are in need. Then, when you are in need and they have plenty, they will help you. In this way both are treated equally."* (2 Cor 8, 12-14)

The response of mutual aid is based on the teaching of solidarity. We are to be *"happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep."* (Rom 12, 15). The sense of solidarity is practiced by God himself. He does not simply stand by and caress us while we suffer. Nor does He only help us. He joins us in our very suffering. Nay, more! He takes our suffering upon himself. This is a very radical form of solidarity. Already in Isaiah, a prophet of the Old Testament, the SUFFERING FOR US of THE SERVANT of God is predicted: *"He endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain that we should have borne....Because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received...The Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved."* (53, 4-6) This is fulfilled in Jesus. St Paul wrote: *"God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! By his blood we are now put right with God.... We were God's enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son."* (Rom 5, 8-10).

It was a noble act, a very noble act to make such an offering but it was not easy for Jesus. As all of us, he too feared suffering and death. His solidarity with us cost him a lot. So he prayed earnestly, with repeated supplications in the Garden of Gethsemani. St Luke recounts, *"He prayed, 'Father, if you will, take*

*this cup of suffering away from me. Not my will, however, but your will be done....In great anguish he prayed even more fervently; his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (22, 42-44) . God in Jesus is no stranger to our suffering and to evil in this world. “He experiences loneliness because of the abandonment and betrayal by friends, he penetrates the darkness of the cruelest physical pain through his crucifixion and even the darkness of the Father’s silence (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Mk 15, 34) and reaches the last abyss of any man, that of death (“He gave a loud cry and breathed his last” Mk 15, 37) ( Message of the Synod #13). By his solidarity with our human condition, even to the point of suffering, Jesus has shown us the way to be truly human. Pope Benedict XVI teaches us: “To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love and in order to become a person who truly loves – these are fundamental elements of humanity, and to abandon them would destroy man himself” (Spes Salvi # 39)*

The solidarity that we experience from God himself and the solidarity that God then enjoins us to have should not only be directed to those human beings who suffer. We should also have solidarity with the whole of creation *“which up to the present groans with pain”* (Rom 8, 22) Hence Proposition 54 of the Synod states: *“To receive the Word of God attested in Sacred Scripture and in the living Tradition of the Church generates a new way of seeing things, promoting a genuine ecology... Hence we hope that, in the pastoral action of the Church, commitment in favor of the safeguarding of creation will be intensified...”*

Because of the solidarity of God in our suffering then we are offered hope. God himself is with us. In spite of evil, which many times are also our own doing, God does not abandon us. God has put the seal of his love over us in and through Jesus Christ. Because of Him nothing can now separate us from the love of God. *“If God is for us, who can be against us? Certainly not God, who did not even keep back his own Son, but offered him for us all! He gave us his Son – will he not also freely give us all things?... Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death?... No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! For I am certain nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life,*

*neither angels or other heavenly rulers or powers, neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.” ( Rom 8, 31-39) Because of this immense love of God no matter how grave the evil around and even within us, the power of his saving love is greater! “Where sin increase, God’s grace increased much more” (Rom 5,20) The pledge of this power is the Holy Spirit who is given to us. St. Paul wrote: “You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership on you by giving you the Holy Spirit he had promised. The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God has promised his people, and this assures us that God will give complete freedom to those who are his.” (Eph 1, 13-14) The Holy Spirit is not only a guarantee, he is also light and guide. Not only! He is also strength and power! The power of God is at work among us! Fortunate are we if we realize “how very great is his power at work in us who believe. This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which he used when he raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world.” (Eph 1, 19-20) Just imagine the power of the resurrection! It can bring life out of death! Death is the ultimate cul-de-sac of life. Nothing can be done in front of it. Death gives meaningless to whatever achievement we have in life. No man has power against it. Death is the epitome of evil, the iniquity in front of which we are helpless. But now there is the power of the resurrection. Death has been overcome. “Death is destroyed; victory is complete! Where, Death, is your victory? Where, Death, is your power to hurt? Death gets its power to hurt from sin...But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (1 Cor 15, 54-57)*

With the power of the resurrection working among us we are assured of victory. Hence the biblical view in front of evil and death is hope. We are not discouraged. The kingdom of God will grow in spite of starting as a small seed (cf. Mt 13, 31-32). Even if now the Kingdom of God is operative among us, it is still experienced as a mixture of good and evil but a time of separation will come (cf. Mt 13, 24-30.36-43). There will be judgment; evil will be punished and good rewarded. “There is nothing that can be hid from God; everything in all creation is exposed and lies open before his eyes. And it is to him that we must all give an

*account of ourselves.*" (Heb 4, 13). The powerful may escape punishment here on earth. They may use the vast resources of the media and their influence to clear their name and hide their misdeeds but in the end, each of us will be accountable in front of an all-just and an all-knowing God. Pope Benedict XVI noted in his encyclical *Spees Salvi*: "Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction, as though nothing had happened" (# 44).

And at the end? At the end the Bible paints total victory, not with a restoration to what we were dreaming of, but the coming of a new reality. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. *"Now God's home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared."* (Rev 21, 23-4)

Denunciation, comfort, help, solidarity and hope. These are the Christian responses to the mystery of iniquity in our midst. The Word of God in the Scriptures, which is *"alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword....judging the desires and thoughts of the heart"* (Heb 4, 12) lights the way for us as we face the baffling and problematic situations of our times. "Hence, the synod fathers encourage a dialogue between the Bible and culture, above all given the questions about meaning present in our time, so that the definitive answer to the search will be found." (Proposition #41) Proposition 39 of the Synod aptly summarizes our Christian commitment in the world: "The Word of God, contained in the Sacred Scriptures and in the living Tradition of the Church, helps the mind and heart of men to understand and love all the human realities and creation. In fact, it helps us to recognize the signs of God in all man's fatigues directed to making the world more just and habitable; it helps in identifying the 'signs of the times' present in history; stimulates believers to commit themselves in favor of those who suffer and are victims of injustice."

Even in social situations then, we can truly say: *"Your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path"* (Ps 119, 105)

## V. THE CHANCE AND CHALLENGE OF BIBLICAL ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

- Prof. Dr. Joseph Pathrapankal, CMI

In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, published in 1998, the late Pope John Paul II invited Asian theologians and philosophers to engage themselves in a re-articulation of the gospel in the Eastern context. He wrote: "In preaching the gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded. Today, as the gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries. My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India, particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind. The first of these is the *universality of the human spirit* (italics mine), whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures." <sup>1</sup> Never before has any other Pope written in so beautiful terms the richness of the Eastern philosophical and theological traditions. The Pope has thereby invited Asian theologians to take up the challenge of articulating biblical and theological concepts giving due respect to Asian thought patterns, taking into account Asia's rich religious and cultural heritage.

It is in these encouraging circumstances for the development of an Asian theology and spirituality that I am proposing a new dimension of Asian spirituality, namely, a Bible-based and a Bible-inspired eco-spirituality which has its fertile and nourishing field in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural,

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<sup>1</sup> *Fides et Ratio* 72

and multi-socio-economic Asian context. Let me explain what I understand by the word spirituality. Spirituality is the spirit-dimensional and spirit-guided, value-based and value-oriented life of human persons, through which the totality of their life is seen and evaluated in and from a God-perspective. When persons regulate their entire life, thinking and activities in accordance with the higher ideals and values of life, accepted by the mind and applied to life by the will, the human spirit, which is the divine and innermost dimension of the human personality, opens itself to the divine realm to be inspired and guided by the divine Spirit. The diversified articulations of this spirit-guided life are what are to be understood as the effect and influence of spirituality in human life. Hence spirituality influences the entire life of the human person, not only certain specified moments of life. As a result, spirituality is something that is to be exercised right in the heart of the world. Spiritual persons try to find the solution for their problems not in the premises and criteria that are available to them from the world around and from the media we come into contact with, but from the values and principles which are derived from beyond the immediate human reach. Human sciences such as psychology and counselling can help persons to a great extent in this discernment process. But the ultimate solutions to all human problems come from the beyond, from the realm of the spirit, from the Word from the beyond, from the Old Testament and also from the teaching of Christ that are available to us in the Gospels and in the other New Testament writings. Hence we have to understand spirituality as something very concrete and within the reach of all persons.

### *The Emergence of Biblical Eco-Spirituality in our Times*

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by an ecological movement both in the political as well as the secular world and also in theological thinking with its eco-spiritual dimensions and style of life, loving and reverencing the nature. This was the aftermath of the ecological crises created by the misuse and abuse of science and technology, through such evils as the Green House Effect, global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation, desertification, and other related atrocities against the environment. Starting with the Rio Summit in June 1992, known as the Earth Summit, and having an annual Earth Day on April 22, the humankind is time and again reminded of its delicate and vulnerable existence on the planet earth in the context of ongoing

ecological crises. The latest attempt of the world body to arrive at a meaningful agreement on this crucial issue in Copenhagen back in December 2009 also did not have the desired result. Without going to the merits and demerits of these efforts, we are going to have a new look, through which we can initiate a new awareness of ecological issues. As part of this movement we have the beginnings of an eco-spirituality which tries to seek and find God not only in prayer, in the study of the sacred scripture, in the participation in the sacraments and in loving service to the neighbour, but also in encountering the creation, by reverencing life in all its diversity as reflections of an all-wise and loving creator and sustainer. Here both ecology and spirituality deal with a common reality, namely, the material cosmos (*ktisis*), the world where humanity dwells together with all the animals and plants. No one can escape the fact of being situated in this world in its physical, material reality. The living human spirit is always enfleshed in a material body, always a being in the world, with other beings, all interacting and inter-dependent. Together there arose also a political will among the nations not to destroy the earth in the name of development and a personal will among the people to avoid consumerism and greed

This challenge of eco-spirituality was very soon taken up by the emerging biblical spirituality, which was sponsored and promoted by the newly developed biblical movement from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century insofar as the ecological dimensions of our created universe spread out in the Bible were accepted as the dynamic framework of a meaningful spirituality. What the scientists, astronomers and astronauts were hinting at as they were studying and observing the vastness and the mystery of the cosmos, theologians began to articulate from their faith perspective. They maintained that our environment, both human and non-human, channel divinity to us, because in every creature we can encounter in some way the creator. Humans, insofar as they are embodied spirits, are able to reach out beyond all material things towards God who is pure spirit and pure being. God is the greatest *Beyond* and at the same time deepest *Immanent*. This is the typical "creature feeling" which Rudolf Otto has developed in his book *Idea of the Holy*, as characterized by the awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery. God is the greatest Beyond who, paradoxically, dwells within the world. Some have



compared God with an infinite circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. God is more intimately present to every creature than the creature is to itself.

Hence, theologians started understanding creation as a sacrament, a visible sign of the invisible divine presence. The whole creation mediates and expresses something of the mystery of God to those who can read these signs. The creature in whom the sacramentality of creation is most evident is the human person. Humans bear the most unmistakable imprint of the transcendent creator in their ability to think creatively, to love unselfishly and to choose freely. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation of divinity in human nature reveals the full potentiality of our nature as radically open to the possibility of divinization. According to the principle of sacramentality, not only human beings but everything that exists has its own inner meaning, beauty and value, its own indispensable part to play in the drama of the unfolding universe. Each reality participates in its own way in the transcendent mystery of being that dwells within it. Everything deserves to be revered for what it is in itself and for what it potentially reveals about God as a sacrament of the divine presence. Each creature is a unique manifestation of the creator, a sacrament of the invisible God. This sacramental nature of the creation makes it necessary that we develop a "sense of the sacred" in dealing with the created things. It is an inbuilt sense in all humans and it needs to be awakened and nurtured. This sense cannot be nurtured through consumerist habits characteristic of our times, habits of acquiring, using up and discarding. People get used to things and they take things for granted and thereby they lose the sense of the sacred, which is indispensable for cultivating an eco-spirituality.

Genuine biblical spirituality encourages eco-spirituality insofar as the Bible is all about a God who entered into human history through his creative and liberating presence and continues to be active in this world. Starting with the first faith statement about a God who created everything (Gen 1:1), the Bible deals with the story of the God-with-us till the completion of history, when God would make his dwelling place with humankind in a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1-5). This is not to be understood in pure apocalyptic but in realistic terms insofar as humankind is a responsible agent in making this world a new

reality capable of constituting and maintaining the human and the divine community. The stages of this divine involvement in human history are narrated with extreme care in the Bible insofar as God is presented as involved in every major event of human history until his decisive and definitive involvement in the incarnation of the Son of God, which reaches its climax in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, thus giving a final proof and confirmation to humankind that matter is not destined to destruction but to transformation. Hence the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a proleptic event sealing the destiny of the material creation. This spirituality of divine immanence, proposed and maintained in the Bible, is the basis of eco-spirituality with its openness to reach out to the whole creation from a spirit perspective. In the same way as biblical spirituality is basically a spirituality of joy and praise, based on the awareness of God-with-us, eco-spirituality is also one characterized by joy, praise and thanksgiving. Eco-spirituality invites humans to experience God in everything and relate everything to God (*ho theos ta panta en pasin*" (1 Cor 15:28). It is a spirituality which invites humans to look forward to the fullness of time (*pleroma of kairos*) when all things will be brought to Christ as the Head (*anakephaliosasthai ta panta en to Christo*) (Eph 1:10).

It is from this perspective that we have to understand many writings of both the Old and the New Testaments. The Psalms as the self-revelation of Israel before God reveal how natural it was for the Hebrew poets to articulate their innermost religious feelings when they encountered this created world. Thousands of years ago a Hebrew poet, looking at the sky above wrote: „How clearly the sky reveals God’s glory! How plainly it shows what he has done! Each day announces it to the following day; each night repeats it to the next. No speech or words are used, no sound is heard. Yet their message goes out to the entire world and heard to the ends of the earth. God made a home in the sky for the sun; it comes out in the morning like a happy bridegroom, like an athlete eager to run a race. It starts at one end of the sky and goes across to the other” (Ps 19:1-6). It was another Hebrew poet who wrote: “O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in the entire world. Your praise reaches up to the heavens; it is sung by children and babies.... When I look at the sky, which you have made, at the moon and the stars, which

you set in their places, what are humans that you think of them; mere mortals, that you care for them? Yet you made them lower only to yourself; you crowned them with glory and honour. You appointed them over everything you made.” (Ps 8:1-5). The Hebrew poet who wrote Psalm 104 meditates on the entire universe as created by God and articulated his feelings of wonder and joy, seeing the beauty and order of this created universe and concluded his cry of joy: “May the glory of the Lord last for ever! May the Lord be happy with what he has made! I will sing to the Lord all my life; as long as I live I will sing praises to my God. May my meditation be pleasing to him” (Ps 104: 31-34).

The basic characteristic of these words of the Psalmist is his awareness of and the sensitivity to the nature as the revelation of God, which exists in one form or other in the nature around him. This awareness and sensitivity are basically the result of an experience of the Divine in the nature, and it is the first religious awakening in a human person which we may call the “nature religion”. Although it is the most primordial tradition of humankind, of late a renewed emphasis is being laid on this basic reality, by which people all over the world seek to get back to the nature as their primordial home, where they want to feel at home and from which they try to reap the harmony of life. The ecological crisis currently in full swing on our planet earth, characterized as it is by air pollution, contamination of water and soil, damaging oil spills, acid rain, devastation of the rain forests, the extinction of tens of thousands of species, global warming, known as the Green-House effect as a result of the depleting of the ozone layer of the earth’s atmosphere through the use of harmful chemicals on a large scale, has all generated a new interest in the old nature mysticism, namely, a mystical vision that invites humans to look at this planet from a divine perspective. The negative results of the industrial revolution and the destruction of the nature have also reawakened a passion for the wilderness consciousness, nature mysticism and the values of the fresh, unmolested beauty of the earth in its natural state.

### *Eco-Spiritual Reflections in the Old Testament*

The Old Testament begins its eco-spiritual reflection through a profound faith statement, when the Priestly writer writes: “In the

beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). This awareness of God-centeredness radically transformed the Hebrew thinking in such a way that we come across several challenging thoughts and practices recorded in the various books of the Old Testament, which bring to light the fact that its eco-spiritual reflections are not only some pious spiritual reflections but also certain realistic demands which are worthy of our admiration and emulation. These demanding directives present before us Israel as a community which was basically open to God and also committed to a life of radical options in their social behaviour and interpersonal relationships. When the Priestly and the Yahwist writers refer to the basic mission of humankind as exercising dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26) and tilling and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15), they are thereby hinting at a principle of involvement and transcendence humankind is expected to have with it in order to maintain the divine image and likeness imparted to it (Gen 1:27) through the gift of the divine breath (Gen 2:7). Consonant with this lofty idea about the human reality and the human task in this created universe we see in the various books of the Old Testament a series of eco-spiritual directives and practices, which constitute some powerful thoughts that can serve as the basis for the radical transformation of a society in our times. The first among them is the theology of the Sabbath rest developed in the Old Testament. Israel understood its Sabbath rest basically as a participation in God's rest through which he completed his work (Gen 2:2), and this cosmic event was the theological basis for Israel's rest, which should teach them how after they had worked for six days they had to transcend their work and belong to the realm of God's rest (Ex 20:8-10). The accent on Sabbath rest was not so much on the physical rest as a cessation from work; but rather on the inner message the Sabbath had of training the people to see their work not as their ultimate mission in this world. It was all a theology of involvement and transcendence, a theology of affirmation, negation and transcendence.

Based on this biblical tradition of the weekly Sabbath we see also in various books of the Pentateuch the evolution of the sabbatical year (Ex 23:10-11; Deut 15:1-3; Lev 25:2-8) as well as the Jubilee year (Lev 25:8-17; 29-31), which were also understood in profound theological and humanitarian terms. Alienation of

family property and the development of lending at interest led to the growth of pauperism and the enslavement of defaulting debtors and their dependents. This destroyed that social equality which had existed at the time of the tribal federation and it still remained as an ideal. The regulation regarding the sabbatical year was that the land should not be cultivated, but had to lie fallow. Like humans and animals, the land also was to have a sabbatical rest. God pledged his extra blessings during the sixth year, the produce of which would enable them to go through the year of the fallow and also the following year till the harvest (Lev 25:18-22). The law of the Sabbatical Year in Deuteronomy directed that debts should be remitted after seven years. The grand sabbatical year, known as the Jubilee Year, was celebrated every fiftieth year. The year was to begin on the Day of Atonement and was a period of emancipation in which all alienated property was to be returned to its original owner (Lev 25:10-13). The Jubilee Year was supposed to be the basis of a periodic rehabilitation so that all can live in dignity as the people of God. On the whole, the picture given here of the socio-economic organization of Israel was something unique and magnificent.

According to many scholars, these prescriptions were never as such put into practice. But its spirit of the appreciation for personal rights and human dignity synthesizes much of Old Testament teaching and it is a great message also for our times and for all times. The underlying reason for these provisions in the Old Testament was this: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine: with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev 25:23). The Psalmist also had his conviction recorded: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps 24:1). In fact, these lofty thoughts of the Old Testament should serve as a caveat for our contemporary trends in globalization where greed is the controlling factor, where humans are made use of as a commodity and are not treated and respected as persons. This is particularly true about the vast Asian continent, and many of its sections were labelled as the Third World for several decades by those who were plundering these lands and their people under the label of colonialism and colonial mission. In fact, all these were basically atrocities meted out to the less privileged on this planet by those

who claimed themselves to be messengers of the good news of God spread out on the pages of the Bible.

### *The Asian Context and the Challenge of Eco-Spirituality*

Asia is perhaps ironically the most variegated and vulnerable region of the earth with regard to its geographical, religious, climatic, ethnic, cultural, economic and environmental complexity. Spread over a very large area on the face of the earth, with its diversified climatic conditions, Asian countries have to face a series of challenges to cope up with the various demands of their complex situation. Ethnically and culturally also Asia is a very much diversified continent. The phenomenon of the less-privileged and dehumanized Dalits and women dispossessed of their legitimate share in the resources of the world is a stark reality of Asia and it calls for an ethical response. A major characteristic of Asia is its religious pluralism. Practically all the major religions of the world co-exist in Asia more or less in a spirit of harmony and mutuality. According to many theologians Asia has the unique privilege of accommodating various religious traditions in this vast continent, almost all of them enjoying equal rights. This phenomenon makes it possible for all religions to have an open mind towards each other, and this prepares the way for the cooperation of all religions to establish a prosperous society. This is very different from the situation where only one religion exists and predominates, because there that one religion monopolizes and controls the whole structure. The presence of many religions with their different philosophies and theologies facilitates a kind of mutual fecundation and corrective criticism, as a result of which a sound and healthy society can gradually emerge. The main condition is that these religions have to be tolerant towards each other and be ready to co-operate among themselves.

Moreover, the still unaccomplished social and economic equality in Asia presents a challenging situation for all these religions to engage themselves in an urgent struggle towards creating a just society, conscientising both the Asian and the international community about the need of radical change in the established structures of the Asian society. They have to use a common language and evolve a common policy for action. The

services of sociologists, theologians and anthropologists are all to be pooled together in organizing this struggle. The major religions of Asia have also to undergo a process of *tapas*, a process of interior warming up, by which to identify the inner essence of these religions and become more tolerant, more open-minded and more co-operative among themselves. It is true that we have passed through the stages of intolerance and hatred among religions. In some quarters there has developed a closer understanding among religions, which tries to establish a principle of complementarity, according to which each religion shows its readiness to be purified and perfected through its association with other religions. It is from this perspective that we try to see the richness of the main Asian religions with regard to their eco-spiritual contributions. This is an area in which Asian religions can come closer and give a message of mutual recognition and appreciation. At this stage of eco-spiritual reflection Asian religions remain at their simplest form and it is here that they can give a healthy and enriching message to the entire world.

### *Eco-Spiritual Dimensions in the Asian World Religions*

The blessing and burden of any Christian theological study in Asia is that it is to be carried out in the context of Asia's religious pluralism. This is a characteristic of Asian religiosity. It is a blessing insofar as the Christians feel related to and enriched by the valid insights of their partners in faith, which sometimes can correct the Christian understanding of some traditionally inherited concepts. At the same time, it is also a burden in the sense that the Christians need to open their eyes to see beyond their own established ways of thinking, which they thought were normative for all issues, the other religions having only some imperfect ideas which had to be corrected and perfected through the Christian understanding. It is high time for the Christians to put an end to this superiority attitude and assume the role of the "little flock" in their theological reflection. Ecological thinking and living are characteristic of many organized world religions as well as primitive religions in the Asian countries. A quick review of some of these religions will reveal the depth of eco-awareness the followers of these religions have in their day-to-day life.

**a) *Hinduism:*** For Hinduism the earth is goddess and mother. Mother earth is the provider, and therefore she is to be protected. According to Hinduism, the supreme God created the world by making self-sacrifice. Since there was no matter out of which the world could be created, God dismembered himself and with it he created the various realities of the world. Hence the cosmos and everything in it come from the divine creator, and therefore there is a divine element in all creatures. In a collection of books known as *Aranyakas*, there is a description of trees and forests as sacred realities. As part of this deistic approach to the world, we have the well-known doctrine of *ahimsa*, a doctrine based on the respect for life. *Ahimsa* is the quality of a person who is enlightened. Manu, the famous lawgiver, prescribed several laws concerning kindness to all living beings, including plants. *Bhagavatgita* also presents *ahimsa* as the greatest of virtues. Modern Hindu leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba were very much conscious of the importance of environmental protection and they wrote about the need of protecting the environment. Gandhiji's life style of simplicity was also motivated by his ecological awareness.

**b) *Islam:*** Islam is a religion which gives much importance to the nature and to its protection. It teaches that all living beings are God's creatures. The earth is not the monopoly of the humans; all living beings have got a right to live on this earth. The non-living beings praise God by their very existence, whereas human beings many a time fail to give praise to God. According to Islam, killing of animals without justifiable cause is one of the seven deadly sins. The spirit of respect and compassion to the nature and its creatures is seen in contemporary writings of Islam, such as the "Muslim Declaration on Nature": "Protection, conservation and development of the environment and natural resources is a mandatory religious duty to which every Muslim should be committed..... Man should not abuse, misuse, or distort the natural resources, as each generation is entitled to benefit from them, but is not entitled to own them permanently.... Nor should they use natural resources irrationally or in such a way as to destroy living resources or spoil their habitats and food bases". Islam condemns all kinds of atrocities towards nature and demands its faithful to be the stewards of this created world by helping the nature and the creatures therein to grow and develop.



Since it is a religion that had its origin in the desert area, it is very much conscious of the need of environmental protection.

*c) Jainism:* Of all the world religions, no one is stricter in its commitment to avoid harming living beings than Jainism. The Jains have accepted a life which is intended to avoid killing any form of life. Since the ultimate goal of life, *mokhsa*, it is to be attained by means of practising *ahimsa*, and thereby purifying the soul. Though the Jains constitute only a rather small community in the Asian scene, they have made a significant contribution to the environmental protection. Dr. R.K. Punshi once said: "All that breathe are precious. Who is to say that the suffering of a sparrow is less worthy of solace than the pain of a human person? The spark of life is no dimmer simply because it is encased in fur or feather". The Jains teach us a lesson about how we have to respect life because it is a gift of God.

*d) Buddhism and Environmental Awareness:* Buddhism, like Hinduism and Jainism, has as its main tenet in the doctrine of *ahimsa*, which is not only non-violence to other living beings, but also compassion towards all creatures. It means to extend loving kindness to all beings; it also means that we should relieve the sufferings of other beings as much as we can. Buddhism is a religion of love, understanding and compassion extended to all living beings. Like human beings, all living beings are sensitive to happiness and suffering. They, too, just like human species, primarily seek happiness and shun suffering. According to Buddhism, the fact that non-human beings are incapable of communicating their feelings is no more an indication of apathy or insensibility to suffering or happiness on their part than in the case of a person whose faculty of speech is impaired. Buddhism believes that all life forms are interrelated and is part of a much larger life-force. So to do harm to any part of this reality is to harm one's own self. In reality there is only one life force in the universe. All of us are a part of this great Life Force. Whenever we cause suffering to any other being, we are causing suffering to this great Life Force. There is nothing that we do that affects only ourselves. The entire universe is helped by our acts of compassion but is harmed by our acts of violence and unkindness.

What these great religions have maintained in the past and are still trying to hold on to have been greatly impaired by the unbridled influence of consumerism assisted by the impact of science and technology. At one stage of the explosion of knowledge gained from science and technology Christian theologians had tried to laugh away the “simplistic and unscientific” ideas of these so-called “Non-Christian religions”!<sup>2</sup> But now we are at a stage of history when these same Christian theologians feel the need of being once again born in the cradle of nature to experience the simple and salutary reality of our communion with the nature, something which our brothers and sisters of other faiths have convincingly established during the past centuries and are still practicing. In this exodus towards the nature we once again find that the Bible, the source of Christian spirituality, also opens before us a universe which God created in the beginning and entrusted to humankind to be its steward and trustee. The various dimensions of this biblical understanding of the nature around us are a rich source for improving the quality of our spirituality.

### *New Developments in Eco-Spirituality*

Nature mysticism gradually leads to a spirituality which is bound up with the creation as the motivation and sustaining force. In fact, the created universe, particularly the planet earth, is the *oikos* (home) for all humankind. Out of a profound love and reverence for this home we have to develop a spiritual outlook which should constantly guide our day-to-day life and activities. It is a creation-centred spirituality. In fact, the universe, the nature and the various forms of life all around us transmit to us the mystery of God. Our sense of the Absolute is derived from our experience of creation’s vast splendour. The earth is the matrix of our life and health, as well as the medium of all our higher values. It is also the mother of our higher existence just as much as it is our sustainer in biological terms. Consequently, humankind must become the servant of the earth’s protection,

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<sup>2</sup> It is high time for the Church and her theologians to discontinue the use of the expression „Non-Christians“, as if being a Christian is the normal and accepted reality. It is all the more so in the Asian context where the Christians continue to exist in a land of religious pluralism.

guardian of a viable earth process.

Thomas Berry, an American Passionist, (1914-2009) had emerged during the past as one of the great prophets of eco-spirituality. The practical need to change direction on our planet, to spark a revolution in our thinking about the earth before it is too late, was the radical focus of Berry's efforts. He was famous for proposing that a deep understanding of the history and functioning of the evolving universe is a necessary inspiration and guide for our own effective functioning as individuals and as a species. He is considered a leader in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the great eco-theologian and eco-mystic. There are two key elements in Thomas Berry's thinking: "Firstly, the primary status of the universe. The universe is, 'the only self-referential reality in the phenomenal world. It is the only text without context. Everything else has to be seen in the context of the universe'. The second element is the significance of story, and in particular the universe as story. 'The universe story is the quintessence of reality. We perceive the story. We put it in our language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in theirs. We can read the story of the universe in the trees. Everything tells the story of the universe. The winds tell the story, literally, not just imaginatively. The story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important to know the story. If you do not know the story, in a sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything". According to Thomas Berry, Christian spirituality and that of the other world religions do not meet the new situation adequately, nor account for the sacred character of the universe. They do not see humans as part of the cosmic process, but transcendent to it. They defend a position of humans as separated and so alienated from the natural environment. They look for a paradise in another world, instead of finding its roots here. Berry advocated an eco-based spirituality, one that is grounded on the inner reality of the cosmos itself, the cosmos as revelatory of the divine presence. He based this spirituality on the monumental fact of the universe event, the expansion, unfolding and evolution of the entire cosmos from its primordial origin some fifteen millions years ago.

It is refreshing and heartening for all of us to realize that eco-spirituality can restore the dignity of the created order, saving

the cosmos from being merely a convenience for humankind and its barbaric exploitation and the destruction of the natural world for making the cosmos its consumer paradise. Eco-spirituality or creation-centred spirituality is the most important development in this century, for with it emerges the realization of the earth and the universe as the heart or focus of our intellectual, moral, aesthetic, practical and spiritual life. Eco-spirituality is singularly significant insofar as it brings all religions closer and creates a link between them and it can have a central place in the heart of each of these religions, being a common dimension of spirituality.

### *Living Biblical Eco-Spirituality Today*

What is imperative about spirituality in our times is a broadening of the very concept of it to include the whole human life, and thereby to see the whole creation as the stage on which to exercise it. Paul wrote to the Romans to offer their body as a living sacrifice and to present it the real worship (Rom 12:1-2). Contemporary awareness of eco-crisis invites humans to search out ways and means for integrating human life into the totality of creation. We have to be rooted in the earth, avoiding arrogance, on the one hand, and servility, on the other. What we need is a sense of solidarity with the cosmos and with humankind. The best way in which we can avoid the present-day ecological crucifixion, created by greed rather than need, is a resolve to leave behind luxury and wastefulness and to move towards an equitable and sustainable style of living. It is our duty to spare the earth for the generations to come. Eco-spiritual living is also an area in which religions and secular agencies can work together because ecological crisis has serious consequences for the whole humankind and hence it is a common cause. Inter-religious dialogue is not primarily meant for sorting out our differences in religious concepts in view of all religions eventually becoming a single religion. Rather it is a coming together of religions to face the common enemies of all religions. Ecological crisis is one of those horrible enemies and all religions have to become aware of it and they have to come together in order to have some action plans. A better eco-awareness invites us to see that the concept of sin, commonly understood as a violation of a positive law, has to be widened in order to include many more areas that are equally sinful. To these sins belong the atrocities meted out to the

environment. Eco-spirituality is an area in which humans are trained to cultivate the qualities of affirmation, negation and transcendence: affirming the positive values of the secular world, denying the passing and transitory standards of this world and thereby transcending this world in order to belong to the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21:1-5).

But eco-spirituality is not the solution to all the problems about spirituality in our times, nor do I claim that nature mysticism is the best form of divine contemplation. I believe there is more to mysticism than nature mysticism and still more to spirituality than eco-spirituality. We cannot ignore the demands of the inner life of the human person and the equally necessary task of the transformation from all forms of self-centredness which is characteristic of all humans. It means self-denial and renunciation as well as the readiness not only to affirm but also to deny the world in order to transcend it and to be one with God. At the same time, eco-spirituality is a corrective to the prevailing ritualistic and cultic spirituality which does not seem to influence the life of the people. Such spirituality is very often restricted to the walls of the temple, the church and the mosque. While cultic spirituality must influence and inspire eco-spirituality, the latter must broaden its horizons to embrace the whole world, because this universe is entrusted to humankind which is created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27).

I conclude these reflections on eco-spirituality in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, the great nature mystic, who has radically influenced the theological thinking of Vatican II, especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World, *Gaudium et Spes*. He wrote: "All over the earth at this moment, at the heart of the new spiritual atmosphere created by the appearance of the idea of evolution, there flow the current of love of God and faith in the world, the one current highly sensitive to the other. In me, by pure chance, the ratio of each has been favourable and their fusion has taken place spontaneously, too weak yet to be propagated with explosive force, but still sufficient to make it clear that fusion itself is possible and that some day or other a chain reaction will come".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Heart of the Matter*, 1978, p. 102

## **VI. SPIRITUAL READING OF THE WORD AND BIBLICAL APOSTOLATE – A FEMALE LAY PERSPECTIVE**

“I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God” (Jn 20,17)

- *Ms. Regina Sook-Hee LIM*

### **Introduction**

This year, we celebrate 45th Anniversary of promulgation of *Dei Verbum* and the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolica Actuositatem*). It is significant for us that the two important Council documents were solemnly promulgated by Pope Paul VI on exactly the same day, November 18, 1965. This historic event makes us reflect once more on the purpose of *Dei Verbum*: “to set forth authentic doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on” in order to bring all people to faith, hope, and love (DV 1).

Understanding divine revelation involves a progression in these three fundamental Christian virtues.<sup>4</sup> The Christian vocation is a call to immerse ourselves in the world in order to study and understand it, to serve the people and their needs. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity states eloquently and clearly that the most effective instrument of the lay apostolate is “the living union with Christ, in keeping with the Lord’s words, ‘He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing’ (John 15,5)” (AA 4).

In view of this, this paper starts with a brief overview of the biblical apostolate in the Korean Catholic Church founded by the laity in 1784. Thereafter I will draw special attention to how the final “Propositions” and the concluding “Message” of the Synod of Bishops, held in Rome, 5-26 October 2008, help promote our biblical pastoral ministry in Asia. Finally, I will present my reflection on the journey of Mary Magdalene (John 20,1-18) to identify our vocation as co-workers of the Word of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. R.D. WITHERUP, *Rediscovering Vatican II. Scripture. Dei Verbum*, New York/Mahwah, NJ 2005.

## 1. The Biblical Apostolate in the Korean Catholic Church

“The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it” (AA 1). One of the most interesting chapters in the history of Catholicism in Korea concerns its origin. Unlike many other lands, where the Christian religion was first brought by foreign missionaries, in Korea in 1784, it began with a kind of “self-study” (self-directed study) of Christian literature by the natives. The books they read contained basic doctrine of the Catholic faith, and they practiced religious virtues from what they learned. The history of the Korean Catholic Church clearly shows how spontaneous and fruitful such activity of the laity was at the very beginning of our local Church, as has been the case for the primitive Church (cf. Acts 11,19-21; 18,26; Rom 16,1-16; Phil 4,3).

Thanks to the laity who proclaimed the Word of God boldly without fear of persecution, the Gospel was able to be spread widely in Korea. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity stated this meaningfully: “The laity must make progress in holiness in a happy and ready spirit... Only by the light of faith and by meditation on the word of God can one always and everywhere recognize God in Whom ‘we live, and move, and have our being’ (Acts 17,28), seeking His will in every event” (AA 4). The active participation of the biblical apostolate of the laity in the Korean Catholic Church has been inherited from the history of our ancestors that meditated on the Word and lived it.

After Vatican II, the implementation of *Dei Verbum* in Korea has been conducted continuously by the great efforts of the dioceses and several religious congregations dedicated to biblical apostolate. In particular, in 2005 the Biblical Committee of Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea published the new translation of the whole Bible, which encouraged more of the faithful to read the Word of God. During the last few years, one of the prominent achievements of the biblical apostolate in Korea was the people’s growing desire to read the biblical text itself. A popular practice is to read, copy word-for-word, and memorize the Bible, going beyond getting merely the biblical knowledge. The rising interest in the *lectio divina* and various programs and biblical materials to help the reading of the whole Bible followed this pastoral ambience.

The Korean Catholic Church holds the “Bible Week” annually to emphasize the importance of the Word of God in the Christian life. During the Bible Week, we have occasion to reflect how the Word of God has become the heart of every pastoral ministry in the Church. Now I can remember one beautiful and significant phrase of the pastoral letter announced on the occasion of the Bible Week in 2006 by the president of the Biblical Committee: “First of all, we ourselves must penetrate into the Word profoundly and meet God. It is not an exaggeration to say that this is all part of the biblical apostolate”. My following reflection on the biblical synod is concerning this point – that is, our personal and total involvement in the Word of God.

## **2. Spiritual Interpretation and Biblical Apostolate in the Light of the Synod on the Word of God**

Church members can apply the final “Propositions” of the Synod in different ways according to their specific apostolate. In particular, in view of the growing interest of the faithful in reading the biblical texts in Korea and in the light of my apostolate experience, I was deeply paying attention to some suggestions of the Synod for the implementation of the spirit of *Dei Verbum* 12: “... Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written...”. I will concentrate on three significant points on the urgent need of spiritual interpretation suggested by the synodal Fathers: (1) Bible reading “in the Spirit” (DV 12.3); (2) Bible reading “in prayer” (DV 25); and (3) importance of *lectio divina*.

### **2.1 Bible Reading “in the Spirit” (DV 12.3)**

On 14 October 2008, during the Synod of Bishops, Pope Benedict XVI stressed the importance of the harmonious dialogue between technical exegesis and spiritual exegesis. The unity of the exegesis is clearly highlighted already in *Dei Verbum* 12. It indicates that there is a need for “spiritual” exegesis, which is a theological and existential interpretation of the Bible. In fact, 25 years after the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, the famous biblical scholar, Ignace de la Potterie noticed the importance of this approach of the Bible: “This integration of historical research and theological and spiritual interpretation of Scripture is our task today; indeed, contemporary research seems to point more and



more in that direction.”<sup>5</sup> To discover the “spiritual sense” of the Scriptures is not beyond the literal text, but inside, in light of the text. The aim is to achieve a “penetration inside the text, such as it was written for believers and from believers, who were inspired by their experience of God”.<sup>6</sup> In other words: the Bible was written in faith; and so it has to be read in faith.

I believe that in the area of the biblical apostolate, the vital need of spiritual interpretation is important not only for biblical experts and theologians but also for the lay faithful who do not have a formal education in biblical studies.

First of all, those who are occupied with production of biblical materials should seriously consider this, because biblical materials constitute a fundamental aspect of the biblical apostolate. We know that exegesis is primarily a science with a function of pastoral service to the ministers of the Word. I asked myself many times why those who study the Bible for a long time do not feel happy after their Bible study and visit other Bible programs continuously like a restless Bible pilgrim. I noticed that the deep reason for this problem is our method of Bible teaching in which the historical-critical method is separated from spiritual reading.

But we know very well that in the tradition of the Church, the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation is to seek its “spiritual understanding”, that is, to arrive at the spiritual meaning of the text in light of the literal meaning. The Church Fathers used three senses of the sacred text to seek “spiritual sense”: (1) allegory (the faith in Christ); (2) typology (the spiritual life based on the faith in Christ); (3) anagogy (the eschatological dimension of the faith). These senses are not separate methodologies, but together they explain one truth, the mystery of Christ. The Church Fathers’ hermeneutic is still useful and illuminates the people who are looking for spiritual meaning in harmony with modern methodology.

Secondly, this proposal is important to the laity who desire to read the biblical text itself and to experience the transformation of their life by the power of the Word through the text. In 1993, the

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<sup>5</sup> DE LA POTTERIE, “La Lettura della Sacra Scrittura ‘nello Spirito’: Il modo patristico di leggere la Bibbia è possibile oggi?” *Civiltà Cattolica* 1986 III, 209-223, 219.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. LAURENTIN, *Comment réconcilier l'exégèse et la foi?*, Paris 1985.

Document of Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (April 23, 1993), states that all members of the Church can participate in the interpretation of the Bible. The document especially indicates that the poor, the forgotten people, can understand the Bible more deeply than theologians or biblical scholars. We believe that the Church has an urgent need to teach to the faithful the profound meaning of Dei Verbum 12, “reading the Bible in the Spirit”. If the hermeneutics of the sacred text is a function of the whole Church (DV 10), the specific function of the Magisterium would be significant for all the faithful in the context of biblical interpretation.

## **2.2 Bible Reading “in prayer” (DV 25)**

The synod proposes that all the faithful, including young people, be exhorted to approach the Scriptures through “prayerful” and assiduous “reading” (cf. DV 25), in such a way that the dialogue with God becomes a daily reality of the people of God (Proposition 22: Word of God and prayerful reading).

Reading the Bible in prayer is very significant among Asian people, because our culture itself values highly the importance of contemplation and prayer. I am deeply impressed that Muslims would listen in silence on their knees to the reading of the Koran from one hour to two hours without moving. To me, their posture of listening to the Koran seems to be obedient prayer. Really, it is surprising that the report of the Catholic Biblical Federation presented to the Synod in 2008, “Thirsting for the Word of God”, indicated that many Catholics do not think of the Bible as a prayer book.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, we see many Catholics who thirst for prayer and even those who study the Bible for several years seek the spiritual discipline of other religions to experience God. Why do we not have the deep experience of prayer with the Bible in our Church?

We can learn the obedient listening of the Word of God from the Virgin Mary. It is Mary the Mother of Jesus who helps us to attain this attitude of reading the Bible in prayer.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. [www.c-b-f.org](http://www.c-b-f.org)

### *2.3 Importance of Lectio Divina*

During the audience to the participants of the International Congress in the occasion of 40th anniversary of the promulgation of *Dei Verbum* held in Rome (on September 16, 2005), Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the significance of *lectio divina* for the Church in connection with the Catholic Biblical Federation's activities. "...the assiduous reading of Holy Scripture accompanied by prayer realizes that intimate colloquy where, by reading, we listen to God who speaks and, in prayer, we respond to Him with confident openness of heart (cf. DV 25). This practice, if effectively promoted, will bring to the Church – of this I am convinced – new spiritual spring. As a firm point of biblical pastoral ministry, *lectio divina* should for this reason be further encouraged, through the use, too, of new methods, carefully considered, that are fully up-to-date. We ought never to forget that the Word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (cf. Ps 118/119,105)."

*Lectio divina* is the mode of reading the Bible "in the Spirit", that is "in the same Spirit that wrote the Word of God." *Lectio divina* is a "method" of reading the Bible that comes to us through the wisdom and experience of many generations of believers. But it must be said clearly that it is not a "technical" method containing a sort of manual instruction for addressing problems and difficulties and that it cannot be summed up in a clear and concrete list of things to do and not to do. I would say that it is rather a kind of attitude based on the experience that the Word of God is not a thing, or a book, but a person – Jesus – and as such the word is alive and calls for our response, our conversion, before his powerful presence.

As other relationships with people in our everyday life, *lectio divina* asks from us the same attitude: obedient listening, attentive research, above all, the total opening of our life, our poverty and our weakness to someone who speaks to us. The real difficulty of adopting this attitude for the reading the Bible derives from our modern life style of living in the world and in the Church. We do not feel the need of deepening intimate relationships with other people. We are accustomed to organizing and proposing programs in the community instead of sitting down at the feet of Our Master to choose "the better part" (cf. Luke 10,38-42). We seem to be in danger of overshadowing the simple and essential centrality of the Word of God that moves

our hearts and transforms our lives. An encounter with the Lord Jesus is the root of everything.

Among various modes to practice *lectio divina*, the liturgical context is very important (DV 12). The Decree of the Apostolate of the Laity stressed, first of all, that “the fruitfulness of the apostolate of lay people depends on their living union with Christ” (n. 4), that is, on a vigorous spirituality nourished by active participation in the Liturgy.

Already 34 years ago, a certain theologian predicted that in the future, the Church will recognize the great need for the spiritual interpretation of the Bible for the salvation of the people of God. It should not be rejected as something useless for the study of modern theology. The need for *lectio divina* challenges us to reflect on our identity as servants of the Word. In summary, we are called to accept and assimilate more profoundly the Word of God and offer the daily testimony of our faith, above all, through the obedient listening and personal dialogue with the Word of God. This is “the better part” of our apostolate.

### **3. Mary Magdalene, the Patroness of the Biblical Apostolate**

Last July, I heard from my friend that the Catholic Biblical Association in Switzerland would proclaim Mary Magdalene as the patroness of their biblical apostolate during their annual meeting in September. Our friends of the Word were inspired by the text of Proposition 30 of the Synod: “Under the guidance of pastors, all the baptized participate in the mission of the Church. The synodal fathers wish to express their most profound esteem and gratitude, as well as to encourage the service of evangelization that so many lay people, especially women, offer with generosity and commitment in communities spread throughout the world, following the example of Mary Magdalene, first witness of paschal joy.” So I will dedicate the rest of my presentation to the reflection of the journey of Mary Magdalene described in John 20,1-18: (1) testimony of resurrection; (2) searching for Jesus; (3) representative of every faithful; (4) apostolic mission.

### 3.1 *Testimony of Resurrection*

Mary Magdalene with the honoured title *Apostola apostolorum* appeared in Hippolytus of Rome's commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles* for the first time.<sup>8</sup> Its fundamental text for this title was rooted in Mary Magdalene's story in John 20,1.11-18. According to John 20,30, the reader's response intended by the author is a confession of the faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Thus, John shows us in John 20,1-18 all sorts of characters in whom the reader sees an exemplary faith.

### 3.2 *Searching for Jesus*

The resurrection of Jesus is crucial for Christian origins because the resurrection generated a Christology, and this Christology generated a new community. In this view, the primary purpose of the text is not only to provide evidence of the resurrection, but to help the Christian community to understand itself. The text does not deal with how the resurrection of Jesus happened but with what happened to the disciples after Jesus' resurrection. The new situation of the disciples in the time begun by the hour of Jesus' crucifixion-glorification is again the subject of Johannine reflection in John 20,11-18.

As we have said, the dominant theme of this passage is the transformation of Mary's attitude; in other words, it is the progress of her "search for the risen Jesus", which leads her, step by step, to recognize Jesus as Lord. The new covenant connected with the resurrection of Jesus is described clearly in the narrative of Mary Magdalene's searching for Jesus. The motif of seeking and finding constitutes the structure of the text. Mary, the representative of "his own" in the Farewell Discourse continued her search for Jesus after the burial of Jesus. Jesus remained always as the "elusive" and "inaccessible" for her. The search for the risen Jesus means to risk mistakes and misunderstanding. Only those who seek in faith "see" the glory of God in his death and resurrection.

John 20,1-18 shows how Jesus' promises in the Farewell Discourse became reality. Let us include Collins' statement as one beautiful comment on the resurrection of Jesus in the light of the New Covenant: "The words, "I must go to the Father", (v. 17) are directed not so much to Mary Magdalene, a woman of history, as

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<sup>8</sup> HIPPOLYTUS of Rome, *De Cantico* 24-26 (CSCO 264, 43-49).

to the entire Church which must live in the great interim between the resurrection and the Parousia. It is the Church which seeks after Jesus; it is the Church which must deal with his absence. The church as faithful searcher must come to know that Jesus has gone to the Father. It is with the Father that he dwells. In his absence, the Church has faith, love, and the Spirit. It has the faith to understand who Jesus is and where he dwells. It has brotherly love which is Jesus' own love. It has the testimony of Jesus' Spirit who is with us forever (John 14,16). Moved by this faith, living this love, and strengthened by the Spirit, the Church must search – UNTIL. Such is the life of both the Church and the disciple in the great interim."<sup>9</sup>

### *3.3 Representative of Every Faithful*

In this narrative, Mary Magdalene has a representative role to play. Thinking Jesus to be her teacher come back to life, she typifies the believer whose resurrection faith is inadequate. Jesus himself must take the initiative in bringing her to an understanding of what the resurrection means. Mary is the one who searches faithfully even after the burial of Jesus. As such she represents every faithful believer. She searches; Jesus manifests himself to her.

When we further inquire as to what the fruit of his resurrection will be, our attention is drawn to the one image found in the text. Mary, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the three diverse examples of humankind: They come to the tomb to see Jesus. Without the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples would remain separately in darkness. But with his resurrection, Jesus creates a fellowship of believers. It is necessary for Jesus to rise from the dead (v. 9) to give life and hope to humankind who are living in darkness. On this point, the bodily resurrection of the Lord is very important in showing that the whole of creation is to be redeemed, the physical no less than the spiritual. Because of the resurrection, Jesus' body becomes our dwelling place. His resurrection makes us begin a completely new life and a new fellowship – the fellowship of love that has always existed between the Father and the Son. In the new fellowship, love

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<sup>9</sup> R. F. COLLINS, "The Search for Jesus", in ID., *These Things Have Been Written. Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids 1990) 94-127, 122.

prevails: namely, the interiorization of the New Covenant becomes possible by Jesus' resurrection.

### **3.4 Apostolic Mission**

We can reflect on two elements of Mary Magdalene's apostolic mission committed by risen Christ: (1) to create the family of God; and (2) to remain in love of Christ.

#### 1) To Create the Family of God

Jesus' announcement to Mary of the good news of Easter is couched in the language of family. As Jesus' ascension, the creation of the new family is fully underway: Jesus' followers are now called his brothers and sisters and children of God. As a result of the completion of Jesus' mission on the cross and the formation of a new family of faith, the disciples have now become his "brothers", "children of God" (cf. 1,12; 11,52). The theme of the definitive covenant between God and men is underlying the Johannine text from the prototype of the sign in Cana (2,1-11) and it evokes some principal words of the Farewell Discourse (13-17). Finally, it is expressed here through the message of the Living one to Mary Magdalene: "I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God." (v. 17)<sup>10</sup>. The plot of the Fourth Gospel revolves around Jesus' fulfillment of his mission to reveal the Father and authorize the children of God.

#### 2) To Remain in Love of Christ

Biblical texts are rooted in a process of ecclesiastical reception and transmission. Liturgy is the most important place to read the Word of God in the church. The second part of John 20,1-18, the story of Mary Magdalene (John 20,1.11-18) is read on Tuesday within the eight feast days after Easter. On July 22, the feast of Mary Magdalene, Cant 3,1-4 is read with John 20,11-18 and the alternative reading is 2 Cor 5,14-17.

The two first readings make us comprehend the heart of the apostolic mission of Mary Magdalene sent by the risen Christ. It is the "love of Christ". Mary Magdalene is the bride who seeks her loving bridegroom in the dark night. The origin of her

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. X. LÉON - DFOUR, *Lecture de l'évangile selon Jean*, IV (Paris 1996) 198.

apostolic mission derived from the endless love of Christ as Apostle Paul confesses in 2 Cor 5,14-17. "For the love of Christ urges us on...even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

The gospel story of Mary Magdalene sets before our eyes Lord's empty tomb and the multitude of persons, both women and men sent by Christ to evangelize with the Good News of the risen Christ. "He was not dead on the Cross. He is present in our soul and his Spirit gives us power to live with joy for the eternal glory of our resurrection...". The voice of the Lord to Mary Magdalene clearly resounds in the depths of each of Christ's followers, who continue the same journey toward Christ. As we hear elsewhere in the gospel: "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser... *Abide in me and I in you*" (John 15,1.4).

### **Conclusion**

I conclude my reflection with one statement that summarizes the apostolic mission of Mary Magdalene and our mission as co-workers of the Word of God: "However, the lay person should learn especially how to perform the mission of Christ and the Church by basing his life on belief in the divine mystery of creation and redemption and by being sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God and who urges all to love God the Father as well as the world and men in Him. This formation should be deemed the basis and condition for every successful apostolate"(AA 29). Once again, as we celebrate the joint anniversary of Dei Verbum and the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, let us pray for that spirit. May the Spirit form our hearts to always seek our living God in the Living Word – for the life of the world, and for our own lives, too.





**Note: By Jacob Theckanath, Executive Secretary, FABC-OE**

The 5<sup>th</sup> Asia Oceania Biblical Congress was organized by the FABC Office of Evangelization (OE) in collaboration with the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF - Asia Oceania Region). It was also the III Bishops' Institute for Biblical Apostolate (BIBA III). A total of 107 delegates from Asia and Oceania participated in the Congress. It was held at the Redemptorist Centre, Pattaya, Thailand from 4-8 November, 2010.

Six of the papers presented during the Congress are published in this issue. For the sake of limiting this issue of FABC Papers to 82 pages some of the papers have been shortened. The remaining papers will be published in a forthcoming issue of FABC PAPERS No. 132b in January, 2011.

All of the papers will be published in a forthcoming book by the FABC Office of Evangelization.

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- ❖ **Bishop Pablo Virgilio S. David**, Chairman, Episcopal Commission for the Biblical Apostolate, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, and Auxiliary Bishop of San Fernando, Pampanga, Philippines.
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